Strategies for Helping First-Generation Students Succeed in the Classroom

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Overview of Presentation

▪ Who are first-generation (FG) students?
▪ Barriers and challenges for FG students
▪ Interventions to assist FG students
▪ Discussion Questions
What does it mean to be first?

▪ “Overcoming feelings of inadequacy and insecurity is one of the first and hardest obstacles that I have faced.”

▪ “I was in a foreign place where everyone seemed to have an advantage but me. I was lucky in that I had professors from similar backgrounds. If not for this, I would not be where I am today.”

▪ “My first few years [of college] were filled with depression, stress and feelings of ‘I should have known this and why can I not grasp this class?’ Now as a senior who is graduating with honors, I feel relieved. However, I still feel underprepared at times”

▪ “Do not underestimate me. I am trying my hardest. But don’t overestimate what I know because I might not know what you think is given knowledge for a college student.”

▪ “Please understand the gaps in our knowledge. Allowing students to know that is okay not to know everything helps.”

▪ “My experience as a [FG] student has been like a mouse navigating an academic maze where I am noticing that the other mice are more efficient than I am. I don’t understand what the difference is between us, which causes me self-doubt and anxiety.”

▪ Getting my education is my priority but I can’t get my education unless I work. Please understand my struggle to balance my life.”
Who are our first-generation students?

- Roughly 32% of students in the U.S. (Georgetown University Center on Education, 2012)

- Disproportionately likely to be female, African-American, Hispanic, low-income, have dependent children. (Georgetown University Center on Education, 2012)

- Enroll in and graduate from college at significantly lower rates than second & third generation peers. (Georgetown University Center on Education, 2012)

- First-generation students graduate at a significantly lower rate (26% versus 68% within 8 years) even when demographics, motivation, preparation, academic progress, grade point average and income are accounted for. (Murphy & Hicks, 2006).

- At ETSU approximately 35% (4000) of students are first-generation. (Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Fall 2017)
Barriers and University Challenges

Academic Barriers

- Report lower educational aspirations
- More likely to enter college academically unprepared
- Reading comprehension and critical thinking do not improve at as high a rate as peers
- Earn lower GPA’s and take fewer hours
- Avoid math, science and humanities majors
- Have a less positive attitude about literacy (reading and writing activities)
- Have trouble identifying major, finding internships or building their resume

Financial Barriers

- Uninformed about financial aid – processes, etc.
- More likely to have additional financial obligations
- Have fewer resources to pay for college
- Nature of and time allotted to work/study differ from that of second-generation peers
- More likely to meet employment obligations than academic obligations
Barriers and University Challenges
(Collier & Morgan; Selby-Theut; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco; Attewell, Heil, & Reisel)

Social Barriers

▪ More likely to live off campus
▪ Less likely to participate in on-campus organizations/events
▪ Identify their closest friends as someone other than college students
▪ Report higher rates of isolation and discrimination – Can’t find their “place”
▪ Perceive faculty as “distant” or unconcerned with them as individuals-intimidated

Cultural Barriers

▪ Less likely to identify college as necessary to achieving goals.
▪ Parents lack “college knowledge”
▪ Only 50% report that their parents are supportive of their decision to attend college
▪ “Live simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither.”
▪ Often lack insight about WHY they are struggling
▪ Worry that their experiences won’t be validated or appreciated
▪ “Segregating” maintains the familiar familial identities and keeps them safe
FG Combined with Appalachian Culture (Collier & Morgan; Lowery-Hart & Pacheco; Hlinka, Mobelini & Giltner; Hlinka)

▪ Factors that affect retention:
  – A) Community’s & family’s values of education provide the initial PUSH to attend and complete college
    ▪ “Better paying jobs”
    ▪ “Less physical labor”
  – B) Students are challenged with possessing the cultural capital that enables them to overcome the PULL of family obligations
    ▪ “Sticking together”
    ▪ Cannot always tell when academics trump family
    ▪ “College student” versus own identity tied to family – “Phony”. Honoring own culture by rejecting college culture. Divided consciousness.
  – C) Students struggle to collect the academic capital to master college-level coursework
    ▪ The transition from concrete (memorization) to abstract orders of cognitive development
Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education (Padgett, Johnson & Pascarella)

- 1) Encouraging contact between student and faculty * Paradox for FG students
- 2) Encouraging cooperation among students ** Very helpful
- 3) Encourage active learning
- 4) Provide prompt feedback
- 5) Emphasize time on task
- 6) Communicate high expectations
- 7) Respect diverse talents and ways of learning
1) Encouraging Contact Between Faculty and Student

- Explain office hours
- Work on being approachable
- Model courtesy
- Initiate contact/offer incentives for contact
- Humanize
- Identify as FG if that applies
- Limit academic jargon
- Make a concerted effort to learn something personal about the student
- Engage with students outside the classroom – sports events, conferences, etc.
2) Encouraging Cooperation Among Students

- Encourage participation in tutoring. (“I was taught to do it on my own and not take help”). Assistance v. Resistance
- Develop and facilitate group study
- Pair FG student with a continuing student (discretely)
- Develop low-stakes group work/assignments
- “Shrink the campus” into a more manageable community
- Monitor language that is used in the classroom so that “in-groups” and “out-groups” are not created in terms of prior academic experiences.
- Incorporate self-assessment and peer review
A Fish In Water

- Vincent Tinto’s (1975) Integration Theory:

“Students must first feel socially integrated, as though they belong or fit in the college setting, before being able to focus on academic integration...”
3) Encourage Active Learning

- Design assignments that emphasize practical application
- Teach from a learning outcomes framework – what students will know, will be able to do
- Tap into students’ prior experiences and help them learn how to apply it to new content
- Help students understand how your class fits into their major/minor and into their professional preparation
4) Provide Prompt Feedback

- Provide examples of strong and weak work

- Offer constructive feedback so that formative evaluation can take place. Don’t forget to highlight student strengths.

- Help students understand what it means to evaluate and critique ideas. Some FG students may come from backgrounds that punish vulnerabilities and views criticism as a personal attack. Some FG students may not be familiar with the academic process that is part of college culture. Normalize the process.

- Help students to identify resources where they can receive help.

- Offer incentives for help-seeking behaviors
5) Emphasize Time on Task

- Students feel that the time they have available for schoolwork should determine priorities (rather than what amount of time it would actually take to master the material). School should “fit” with other responsibilities not necessarily be the priority.

- FG students tend to overcommit but have fewer resources.

- Help students learn the “balance” between home and school. Time management skills should be emphasized. Proactive advising is helpful.

- “Helping” family alleviates some of the family achievement guilt felt by many FG students
6) Communicate High Expectations

- Communicate high expectations in a supportive way

- Be intentional. Explain your teaching approach and instructional strategies.

- Provide guidelines and rubrics on how students will be evaluated. Use a detailed syllabus with bullet points and bold font to emphasize important points. Be specific about how to take notes. Faculty think that they already do this. Don’t just hand out – go over.

- Understanding the implied meaning is not always a given. “Write” the paper for example. Be explicit. Check assignments for clarity. Style guides.

- FG students want faculty to be more explicit on how to take notes, assignment descriptions and specifics about tests. FG students tend to rely almost exclusively on information that they hear and observe in class from the professor.
7) Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning

- Bringing FG cultural wealth into classroom.

- Use intergroup dialogue (supportive, safe and identity-safe) to explore how significant social differences – such as race, ethnicity, gender, social class, etc. can shape their own and others’ experiences and opportunities in college and life.

- Have a conversation about what it means to be a “good” son or daughter and a good student at the same time- can’t always be “do what you’re told” - Storytelling about success is a powerful tool – “My aunt’s boyfriend’s sister’s dog had to be put down.”
Diverse Talents Cont.

- Help students feel valued and cared for (mimicking the familial experience to some extent). Coddling versus cutting the apron strings – finding the balance.

- Highlighting and reframing deficits as strengths.

- Build bridges between their home and validate their presence at the academy. (Educate students and families on the realities of earning an education and setting priorities)

- Familiarize students with what resources are available.
# TRIO RESOURCES AT ETSU

**Student Support Services**
- Tutoring
- Graduate School Counseling
- Career Counseling
- Personal Counseling

**McNair Program**
- Undergraduate retention
- Research skill development
- Graduate school preparation
- Faculty mentors

**WILL BE LOCATED IN LUCILLE CLEMENT DURING CULP RENO**

**LOCATED IN THE CAMPUS CENTER BUILDING**
Discussion Questions

▪ How can you be flexible in the classroom and still maintain some sense of structure?

▪ How do you find the time to do all this while still teaching your content?
References


References cont.


- Promoting instructional success for first-generation college students (n.d.). Center for Educational Effectiveness, UC Davis.

- Lohman, L. (2015). Twenty-two tips for teaching first-generation college students at CSUF.


References cont.


