

## **Is Your Institution A Welcoming Place For First Generation Students?**

**By Joyce E. Suber**

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According to recent data gathered from a nationwide sample of more than 300 four-year colleges, 1 in 6 freshmen are first generation students, i.e., students whose parents have no college experience. While this group of students may represent any ethnic or socioeconomic group, research also indicates that they are largely Latino, American Indian, and Black, with females showing greater representation in each of these groups. Additionally, it appears that nearly 60% of first generation students are also from families with two or more children and annual household incomes of less than \$50,000.

While recruiting first generation students is of great benefit to colleges and universities who are working to increase or maintain enrollment or to achieve greater diversity among their student populations, it is also important that educators in higher education understand these students in order to ensure their retention and success in the college environment. Not only must there be adequate financial aid to allow them to attend your institution in the first place, but there is also the need for support services that address their unique issues. Creating a climate of inclusiveness in which first generation students can thrive is the key.

Among the issues that influence college attendance and the retention of this group of students are:

- **Parental support for education**

There is strong evidence that first generation students whose parents support their desire to attend college - despite the parents own college experience - appear to show greater motivation and persistence toward graduation than their counterparts who lack this type of support.

Logically, income plays a significant role in viewing education as a priority. In low income families, where the focus is largely on economic survival, students are, more often than not, expected to contribute significantly to the household income. Attending college nights or college counseling programs may also be unlikely for these parents, given their awareness of, or interest in these activities.

Generating parental support for, and involvement in the college planning process is, therefore, a necessary step early in the recruitment of first generation students. Yet, this presents a particular challenge. However, working with on-campus student organizations, churches, community groups, and educational programs such as TRIO, your institution may be able to find creative ways to overcome these challenges.

- **Preparedness for college**

Since the majority of first generation college students have attended public schools where they may not have been enrolled in a college preparatory curriculum, some may lack coursework and test scores, as well as study, time management, and organizational skills indicative of college success. In addition, first generation students sometimes lack support from their counselors and teachers for engaging in a college preparatory course of study or furthering their educational experience.

Colleges and universities must consider this in the recruitment and enrollment of these students. If they are serious about admitting and retaining new markets of students - first generation students, rural students, students with learning disabilities, etc - they should also be prepared to create and utilize rubrics for admission, academic interventions, and teaching strategies that reflect awareness of other factors (including the students' untapped skills and talents) that may make such students attractive candidates or enhance their chances for college success.

- **College planning**

Many first generation students may not have engaged in timely college planning and may need assistance in choosing colleges that match their needs, interests, and abilities, registering for and preparing for college entrance exams, completing financial aid forms, etc.

As with the parental support issue, collaborative efforts born of partnerships with schools, community organizations, tutorial and test preparation organizations, churches, educational programs, and even corporations can aid colleges and universities in providing services that will increase awareness regarding the college planning process.

- **Systemic Orientation**

All first-year students need help in understanding the campus environment, residential life, and how to negotiate the system (where to go/who to see for what). This is particularly vital for those with no frame of reference on which to draw in surviving what may be an overwhelming change and cultural shock related to attending college.

From pre-college programs to first-year orientation programs to the student advisory system, colleges and universities can demonstrate their awareness of the unique needs of first-generation students by offering services and activities that pave the way to success.

- **Their perception of inclusiveness in campus activities**

College and universities should make every effort to encourage first generation students to get involved and assume leadership in activities that interest them and enhance the skills and talents they may bring to campus life. The inclusion of these students in residential leadership and decision-making, in representation on university-wide committees, in contributions to and features in campus

publications, in planning student activities, and other campus activities will not only allow them to have a voice in campus life, but also prove helpful in making the institutional community aware of the positive ways in which their presence can impact the college experience for everyone - students, faculty, and administration.

- **Facility in the use of computer technology**

A significant number of first generation students may have had limited experience in using modern computer technology, particularly if they are from homes where English is not the first language.

Pre-college and first-year students who are first generation may benefit from programs or services offered by your institution that provide exposure to and training in the use of computers, as well as the use of applications and software that will enrich their learning and facilitate their success as students.

Addressing these and other issues that characterize the experience of the first generation student will make a real difference in giving them a sense that you understand their needs and concerns - that you are proactive in aiding them in their persistence toward graduation. When they have completed their time as undergraduate students at your institution, they will be able to say "Thank you!" because the message your enrollment management team has conveyed, since your first generation students were "prospects", is "You're welcome!"

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