

The Journey to Dream: Experiences of First-Generation College Students

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Introduction

First-generation college students are students without parents or guardians, and generations before them, who have obtained a college degree.

Students who are first-generation are leaping into a challenging new world with no family legacy of college education. This poses a myriad of challenges that we have chosen to explore.

Certain aspects of identity, including ethnicity, race, and socioeconomic class can be analyzed to better understand why first-generation students may combat issues concerning alienation, detachment, and overwhelming expectations. These hardships may challenge students and limit their potential from thriving in the academic field. In this study we addressed and identified themes and trends surrounding student motivation to attend university and the systemic pressures that accompany them. This research also aims to acknowledge the shared characteristics of the first-generation experience and its relevance to identity. Bui's research showed that "in comparison to the other students, first-generation college students express greater fear of failing in college, worry more about financial aid, and feel they have to put more time into studying" (Bui 2002).

Goucher College has a pre-orientation student program called Phoenix Rising. It was designed to help incoming first-generation students to adjust to college social and academic life. Such specified programming indicates an understanding that first-generation college students are met with specific obstacles that need to be structurally addressed.

Despite this knowledge, there seems to be little research exploring these students' own understanding and meaning constructed from their experience. Much of the research and literature addresses them as statistics and does not look at their unique experiences and the structural conditions that affect them.

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of first-generation students at Goucher College through a comparative lens considering their unique perspectives and identities.

Our research was guided by the following research questions: What are the motivations of first-generation college students? Are the experiences of first-generation students different due to aspects of their socioeconomic background? How do first-generation students perceive themselves?

Methodology

This study was guided by qualitative research methodology. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain rich narratives of individual experiences, giving the informants freedom to express their views. The research team utilized the convenience sampling technique. Ten semi-structured interviews were carried out with first-generation students of different class levels and ethnic backgrounds at Goucher College. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Memos were created throughout the coding process to connect and further develop analyses on emerging themes. Some examples of the interview questions asked were:

- What motivated you to attend college?
- What hardships or obstacles did you face while applying to college? If any?
- What obstacles, fears, or concerns did you face when you got into college?
- How do you engage with the college community besides academics?
- Do you feel that you carry more, less, or the same amount of responsibility than your peers?

References

Bui, Khanh Van T. 2002. "First-Generation College Students at a Four-Year University: Background Characteristics, Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education, and First-Year Experiences." *College Student Journal* (36)1.

Discussion

Dutiful Burden

"It was like I'm going to school to go to college. It wasn't an option that I wasn't gonna go to college, you know, I was going to go like no matter what happened."

This theme addresses the expectation to attend college that many students felt burdened by because, as one respondent explained, it was not a question of "if you are going to attend college" it was "when you attend college". Parents instilled in them that college was a necessity and needed for a prosperous life. Despite their parents having little understanding of the process to get into college, the rhetoric at home was very supportive and often demanding of their attendance. As one interviewee described, "I feel like there's a lot of weight on my shoulders...I have to do everything on my own at times, which really is stressful. Especially because my parents don't know how to navigate college, I don't know how to navigate those problems, or things of that sort."

Socioeconomic Challenges

"It was a lot of pressure...like this invisible amount of pressure because I'm black."

There were specific socioeconomic situations that made the task of attending college challenging for many of the participants. Racial-ethnic identity was often brought up and intertwined with the difficulties they experienced in educational institutions. Some mentioned feeling pressured because they felt that not attending college as a black person would limit their choices. Others said that they were teased and excluded in their predominantly white high schools, but at Goucher, which is also predominantly white, the student-led affinity groups they joined helped them feel a sense of connection and acceptance. Economically, all the participants expressed that they did not come from economically stable households. Many stated that they chose Goucher because the financial aid offered was the best. One respondent explained, "I wanted to go to another school, but I just couldn't afford it, and so I had to go with who gave me the most money." Another interviewee stated, "I feel like with people who don't really have a lot of money, you don't really have a lot of time or liberty to mess up. You only have one chance. So, it's a lot of pressure to make the most of it because this is it."

Institutional Support

"Schools don't cater to first-generation college students. There is an assumption that you should already know what you need to do and how you should do it, but we don't. We don't know, our parents don't know."

Some participants did express a lack of support and the need for comprehensive and improved programming. One participant stated that they felt well supported in high school but in college "it feels like I'm on my own and that like I have to put in more effort to kind of reach out for the support that I need, which like, you know, was fine." Another said that Goucher "comes across as they are trying to fill a quota set by affirmative action rather than trying to diversify". However, there were many who said their high school programs played crucial roles to their admission to college. These programs and individuals were instrumental in coaching and providing access to resources that made the application process a lot less stressful and much more manageable. One respondent stated that though college was an assumed next step, what really motivated her was the resources she had access to, "It wasn't an option that I wasn't gonna go to college, you know, I was going to go like no matter what happened. But I think it was more of like the resources I had and like where to apply and what schools there are".

A Path Forward

We must recognize that the first-generation identity should not be referenced as a simple statistic, but rather, an identity that recognizes ambition and determination. What we've learned from our participants are ways that our college, and other institutions, can work to improve access and support to prospective and current first-generation college students. The following are our suggestions:

- Invest in high school college preparedness programming
- Develop parent focused programs in conjunction with high school programs
- Invest in supplemental support specific to first-gens throughout all years of college attendance
- Provide networking & community building programs in college to build social capital.