Understanding the Uniqueness of the First Generation Community College Student:
How much Does It Matter?

Elizabeth DeGiorgio, Mercer County Community College

Abstract

First generation college (FGC) students are finding it difficult to graduate because many colleges are not addressing the disconnect between FGC students cultural norms and the college culture. I will show how first generation college students differ from their continuing generation peers. First generation students are less likely to be engaged in the academic and social experiences that foster success in college. Successful college students typically study in groups, interact with faculty and other students, participate in extracurricular activities, and use support services. They do not struggle with issues of belonging and cultural differences. This paper will address the unique characteristics of FGCS that strongly influence attaining a college degree. The discussion also explores programs and interventions used at various educational institutions to support these students and suggestions on how community colleges can use these interventions to ensure the success of first generation college students. The review focuses on three important areas. The first section deals with the social and personal challenges of the first generation college students. The second section deals with interventions that work and the third section deals with recommendations for instructors to help FGC students advance in college. In conducting this review, the conclusion was reached that first generation college students face barriers to college access and success. Their opportunities for economic growth, personal development, and social mobility are limited and their adjustment to college is often more complicated than their non-first generation peers. Conflicting conceptions of home and campus community along with a lack of transparency of resources available makes identifying and understanding the experience and the needs of the first generation college student matter greatly.

Introduction

It was in high school that I began to fully understand the disadvantages that came with being a first-generation student: I realized that the cultural and linguistic barriers my parents faced greatly limited their ability to be involved in my academic development. I was also poor, which made me feel out of place where the majority of my classmates came from upper-middle class backgrounds. During this time, I was terribly embarrassed of my identity as a first-generation student and did everything I could to hide from it (Xiong, 2014).

A 2010 study by the Department of Education found that 50 percent of the college population is made up of first-generation students, or those whose parents did not receive education beyond a high school diploma. The National Center for Education Statistics released numbers in 2010 that broke down the educational levels of parents of current college attendees. Minority groups made up the largest demographics of students with parents that had a high
school education or less, with 48.5 percent of Latino and Hispanic students and 45 percent of Black or African-American students included. The parents of students of Asian descent came in at 32 percent with a high school diploma or less, and Native Americans at 35 percent. Of students that identified themselves as Caucasian, only 28 percent were first-generation college students (Lynch, 2013).

Numerous researchers have found that FGC students often start at community colleges and tend to have different educational experiences from those of non-first generation college students. For instance, FGS attending community college complete fewer college credit hours, work more hours, have lower grades and study less than do other students (Chen, 2005; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson, & Terrenzini, 2003; Teerenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996) in (Mejer, 2009). According to Stephens et al 2014, only 13.3 percent first-generation students will graduate from a 4 year college. FGCS make up 52 percent of students at community colleges. Those at community colleges are less likely to finish school with only 49 percent graduating. Stephens claims that these inequalities reveal a staggering problem with higher education in the United States that cannot be solved by lowering financial barriers alone. Research has also suggested that differences in outcomes may be related to issues associated with commitments, social adjustment and campus involvement. Given that these obstacles to FGC student success appear to be intrapersonal and social concerns, it is important to explore their unique psychosocial characteristics.

**Living in Two Cultures**

There are several social factors that influence the college experience of the FGCS. The FGC student is unique from the continuing generation community college student-students who have at least one parent with a college degree. These particular students have parents lacking social capital; the knowledge, language, values, experiences, and ways of doing things that are
done during the course of the college experience by the dominant group. A first generation college student reflects:

I come from a working-class family: my dad is a tow truck driver and my mom is a day care teacher. Not having financial support from my family felt like such a large setback. I learned that there is support out there for people like me; but, this also brought so much more work into the process, as well as so many questions that my parents just couldn’t answer. I felt that I had no one who could truly guide me through it all. Although my parents tried to help me every step of the way, together we would stare at the computer screen for hours in pure confusion. But finally, I figured it all out, submitted my applications and decoded the confusion of FAFSA. Now I was one step closer to becoming a real college student (O’Rourke, 2014).

Unable to rely on parents for guidance makes it difficult for FGC students to make informed choices about curriculum, internships, and also about whether to remain in college. As a result, FGCS are more likely to withdraw, to repeat courses, and to leave college without getting a degree.

A positive freshman college experience is particularly critical for FGC students as they have a higher risk for attrition in between their first and second year (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Prior to college, FGC students have less exposure to and access to the types of middle class cultural capital, understandings of the rules of the game- that are taken for granted as normative by many community colleges. Lopez highlights the importance of addressing some significant areas that need attention because they have implications for completing college.

I struggled to thrive my freshman year, both socially and academically. I didn’t have the study skills or time management skills to be able to do well academically, and I hadn’t gone to an elite high school like many of my peers. Socially, I found it tough to find students to relate to.

By the time my sophomore year rolled around, I was ready to leave. I just wasn’t sure I could do well and be happy for the remaining years. Through the encouragement of a friend, I decided to stay. That year, I tried very hard to find a social niche: I explored various clubs in the hope of finding a community. I also tried to figure out my academic direction. I wasn’t completely sure what to major
in and wasn’t sure who to ask for help. As a first-generation student, I couldn’t ask my parents for career advice (Lopez, 2014).

Cultural and social skills are important skills FGC need to gain once they get to college if they have not arrived with them. Consequently, first-generation students are often uncertain about the “right” way to act as college students and begin to question whether they belong and can be successful in college settings (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007). This uncertainty can hinder their ability to effectively navigate the college experience and to take full advantage of all the opportunities that college has to offer (Housel & Harvey, 2009).

FGC students encounter cultural obstacles as they experience a mismatch between their own cultural norms and the norms that are institutionalized in a given setting. After arriving at college, FGC students encounter a context that reflects and promotes a culture specific set of assumptions or norms for how to be a college student. Working and learning independently, finding a way to achieve goals, and self-reliance are the norms reflected in institutional policies and teaching practices. First-generation students with strong collectivist values that center on the importance of family collectivity and interdependence may likely be experiencing a dramatic shift in values associated with a break from family, context, and tradition (Terenzini & Rendon, 1994).

Not only is a focus on independence negatively impacting first-generation students’ academic achievement, it also has neurological implications. It causes an increase in negative emotions, prompting the excretion of cortisol. Cortisol is a hormone excreted as a biological response to negative psychological experiences. It can cause difficulties with cognition, difficulties with recall and memory, and anxiety and depression. Another study conducted by Stephens, Townsend, Markus, and Phillips (2012) discovered that independent cultural norms produced more negative emotions and, therefore, higher levels of cortisol in first-generation students than
in continuing generation students. Even at institutions that are models for diversity and inclusion, independent cultural norms can negatively impact first-generation students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias 2012).

Several scholars have discussed the challenge faced by first-generation students of living in two cultures but really not belonging to either (London, 1989; Lubrano, 2004). As cultural outsiders, FGC students find it difficult to reorient how they view the world and in many cases believe they have to reject and devalue their own cultural background. If they start feeling, to fit in here I have to move too far away from my peer group back home they may decide it's not worth it. Much of the discomfort felt by first-generation students was described by them in terms of class differences and a “hard to explain” sense of “otherness.” In interviews, these students commonly said that this sense of being an outsider had hindered their education experience overall (Korsmo, 2014). It is important to help FGC students to understand the impact of their cultural background on their identity. More resources are needed to help FGC students to figure out what aspects of their own experience make them feel a sense of “otherness.”

Aligning FGC students with an individualistic college community while they have a collectivist identity will create a tension for them because it is difficult for them to reconcile with that new model. The difficulty in reconciling conflict and integrating into college life, along with experiencing problems connecting to their peers and instructors, leads to feelings of inferiority, academic incompetency and intimidation. As a result, many FGC students see dropping out of college as a way of resolving and reconciling discontinuities.

**Intrapersonal struggles**

There are intrapersonal struggles which highlight the psychological dimension of the obstacles FGC students face. One unique challenge is the intrapersonal and non-cognitive struggle with guilt. FGC students may worry excessively and needlessly about leaving their
parents and friends behind as they work towards social mobility. By being the first in the family to attend college GFC students feel that they are breaking rather than continuing family traditions that they are expected to preserve. In some cases, FGC students are ridiculed, discouraged, and criticized by family members and peers for deciding to go to college. For example, Piorkowski (1983) pointed out that issues such as a change in “manner of speaking [e.g., vocabulary] becomes the object of ridicule by family members who feel threatened by such differences from family norms.” On the other hand, FGC students may feel pressure to excel as the first in the family to make it to college and feel guilty about their academic performance if it is not as good as they or their family would like. As a result of conflicting values, FGC students struggle with a great deal of emotional turmoil that may create feelings of anxiety and depression, thus making it difficult to meet the demands of the college experience.

According to Chickering (1993), FGC students may experience identity confusion related to feelings of being removed from the support of their family, friends, and community while experiencing the developmental task of creating their own unique identity. This identity encompasses the confidence gained from developing competence; the ability to experience emotions gained from effectively managing emotions; and the ability to be connected to others while maintaining their own values by becoming autonomous (Alessandria & Nelson, 2005) (Phinney et al., 1997). According to Phinney, Chavira, and Williamson (1992), there are four ways an individual may choose to participate in society: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginality. Assimilation occurs when an individual abandons all connections to ethnicity in order to identify with the dominant culture. Integration occurs when the individual identifies strongly and is involved with both the ethnic and the dominant cultures. Separation is characterized by minimal if any interaction with the dominant culture and an intense focus on the
ethnic group and its traditions and values. Marginality is characterized by forfeiture of the individual’s native culture and an absence of involvement with the dominant culture (Phinney et al., 1992). According to Berry (1995), identity confusion is a possible effect of stress related to acculturation. First-generation Americans may have difficulty determining their affiliative group, which may negatively influence self-esteem. Achieving mobility involves not only gain, but loss as well. What happens when first generation college students change to such a degree as a result of their education and now find that they are no longer comfortable with their family and friends? Their transformation makes them unfamiliar to their parents who did not attend college thus resulting in discomfort and distancing. From their perspective, it’s almost like you can’t go home anymore.

It is important for FGC students to experience a sense of belonging and satisfaction with their college experience in order to be persistent and successful. A student’s sense of belonging affects their academic achievement and retention. Research in the field of psychology has demonstrated that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation that can have a powerful influence on behavior (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Hausmenn et al 2008 found that sense of belonging had a direct, positive effect on students’ institutional commitment, and significant indirect effects on intentions to persist and actual persistence. Experiencing a sense of belonging means that the FGC students feel connected to the college community and that they matter. According to Schlossberg, mattering means attention, the feeling that one is noticed; importance, a belief that one is cared about; ego-extension, the feeling that someone else will be proud or sympathetic; dependence, a feeling of being needed; and appreciation, which constitutes feeling that one’s efforts are appreciated by others. Perceptions of Mattering equal success: A sense of mattering motivates students to learn and increases the likelihood that they will persist.
and develop (Schlossberg et al., 1989). In contrast, FGC students typically feel insignificant and invisible. Some even feel unworthy of participating in the academic community.

Psychologist Barbara Jensen counsels and teaches FGC students to deal with the dissonance between their familiar roots and collegiate experiences. “Rather than focusing on the individual at the expense of broader social analysis, Jensen concludes that “cultural difference and prejudice against working class culture combine to frustrate the ‘upwardly’ mobile student.” With regard to home environments, she describes parents who view college as a wasteful indulgence partly out of fear that they might feel subordinate to their college-educated children. Contending that college education too often requires repudiation of one’s family ways when a first-generation student is on or near the campus, Jensen laments that “to succeed in higher education... you must ‘leave behind’ your ‘low class’ ways, your ‘bad’ English, your values of humility and inclusion [and] the people you love!” (Kniffen, 2007).

These psychological obstacles of FGCS have very real causes. Since FGC students at community colleges are commuters and have competing needs, opportunities for academic and social engagement, establishing meaningful social connections and becoming socially academically integrated on campus are limited. In addition, FGC students are also reluctant and afraid to seek out their faculty. This makes it difficult to develop a sense of belonging to the college community, which is an important precursor to desirable outcomes such as persistence and commitment. A FGS describes her difficulties in this area while attempting college studies.

Ana perceived her family as unsupportive of her schoolwork. They expected her to help them even if she had schoolwork, and she felt obliged to do so.

I would have liked my father to be more understanding of the females in the household .... Since I knew [getting moved] was important to him, I had to drop
my schoolwork." Her friends similarly did not provide support. "I would have liked to talk to my best friend, but ... I could not get her to listen to my problems. Her comments suggest that her parents and friends did not understand or support her academic goals, perhaps contributing to her low self-efficacy (Phinney & Haas 2003).

It is useful to better understand the concerns of the FGC student because their concerns play a critical role upon which their whole college experience may be based. To determine whether FGC students shared the findings discussed in this paper a short survey was administered to interested college students.

**First Generation College Students Survey**

20 FGC students replied to a request to complete a survey about their experience as a first-generation college student. The survey request was posted on face book and first generation college student was defined. A review of the responses clearly showed that having connections and a sense of positive self-efficacy were instrumental in succeeding in college. Self-efficacy is the confidence to make choices and engage in behaviors related to higher education. One participant commented she had no one to make her aware of her choices or opportunities in college. Her dream of becoming a Social Worker was never realized because of her inability to make friends or connect with anyone in college. Over time she lost her motivation to resume her college education and to this day regrets the loss of a dream. Another FGC student responded:

I remember being very anxious and overwhelmed on the first day of college. A friend and I walked each other to every class that day for fear of getting lost and being late to class. As the time went on the anxiety of finding classrooms became anxiety of getting high grades and papers turned in on time, and in the end it all turned in to the excitement of completing four more years of school and moving on in the real world. The process of going through college was overwhelming, but early enough on I found a group of friends that were feeling the same way and we became each other’s support system. I was also lucky enough to connect with some professors and whether or not I was taking his/her class, it was another person that I could speak to about what I was feeling.
In some cases, especially for males, connection and relationship was the results of participation on a sports team. This facilitated the adjustment to college. Pre-college experiences that focused on networking and dialogue also seemed to matter because they fostered a sense of belonging.

The most serious conflicts were faced by a FGC bilingual student with two children, returning to college at age 35. She had no friends or family in this country.

The conflict with cultural values I encountered was discrimination. Sometimes I felt and was treated like I did not belong here in this country. I represent the break in the family tradition in where women do not go to school because you marry after high school. It was frightening to take the step of enrolling to classes with small children, needing the support of others as well as the college. I felt guilty for taking time for myself. I have been embarrassed by my own son saying that I am too old to be in school.

Her experience highlights the dissonance experienced by some FGC students. She is presently in a community college trying to complete her education one course per semester. She suggested that within the FGC student group there are subgroups of minority women and adults returning to college that also need to be recognized.

**Attempts to Bridge the Gap**

An awareness of the conflicts faced by first generation college students has led some colleges to develop practices to help FGCS deal with their disadvantages and barriers. “There are some federally funded programs in place to address the specific issues that face first-generation college students, like the TRIO and Robert McNair programs that lend academic and tutoring services to this group. The problem with these programs, and others like them, is that they are not required for college graduation and are vastly underutilized” (Lynch, 2013).

Families typically serve as the primary source of social capital for students, especially in relation to their education. However first-generation youth often have social capital deficits placing them at risk when it comes to endorsing postsecondary educational opportunities and
options. According to social capital theory, networks of relationships can help students manage unfamiliar environment by providing them with relevant information, guidance, and emotional support.

To address social capital deficits, School counselors can provide students and their families with ongoing information and make special efforts to provide culturally relevant interventions that support and encourage students and families who historically have had limited access to higher education (Owen, 2013). According to Laura Owen, Ph.D., an assistant professor at San Diego State University, Counselors can assist students during the summer and employ a variety of initiatives to help these students, including building rapport; listing important tasks and timelines for completion; providing direct outreach via texts, e-mails and phone calls; forming collaborative relationships, and establishing outside contacts; communicating with parents; adjusting work hours to meet student and parent schedules; and advocating on behalf of students to university and college admissions, financial aid, and student affairs offices. These initiatives also address the problems of belonging and the cultural tensions between family and college community.

PERTS, which stands for the Project for Education Research That Scales, is an applied research center at Stanford University. Four researchers worked together to undertake a first of its kind study (“The College Transition Collaborative“) to evaluate the effects of “mindset interventions” on primarily first-generation and minority student populations. A mindset intervention is defined as “online reading and writing activities in which students learn from stories from older students about common challenges in the transition to college and how they can overcome these challenges.” Recent research shows that brief, well-tailored messages delivered at key transition moments can change students’ mindsets about college and improve
their outcomes. These interventions help students anticipate challenges they will face in college and plan ways to overcome them. For example, a social-belonging intervention lets students know that everyone worries at first about whether they belong in college, but these worries fade away with time. New beliefs helps students stay in college when they feel isolated or excluded early in their college experience. According to the researchers, mindset interventions improve student success. They help prepare students to develop social capital on campus. They promote close friendships, involvement in student groups, and engagement with professors and the development of mentor relationships. Making these kinds of connections is essential for college student success because worries about one's belonging or academic abilities, arising from previous social or economic disadvantage, can prevent students from steps to acquire social capital. These interventions clearly show that students can break out of their sense of isolation. They come to realize that they are not the only ones who feel this way.

Another successful intervention is CSO, Center For Student Opportunity, a national nonprofit based in Bethesda, Md. that works to empower first-generation College students. CSO has created tools and resources to help first-generation college students and their supporters—parents, counselors, and mentors—on the road to and through college. In 2013, CSO launched I'm First! (ImFirst.org), an online campaign celebrating first-generation college students and a web application designed to help aspiring first-generation college students research and plan for college. In addition to operating ImFirst.org, CSO publishes the I'm First! Guide to College and maintains partnerships with colleges and universities across the country to strengthen and build awareness of their campus efforts supporting first-generation college students.

A difference intervention program implemented by Nicole Stephens et. al, 2014 found that talking about social class helped first-generation college students reduce the social-class
achievement by as much as 63 percent. In the one hour program, college students from a range of backgrounds talked about how they adjusted to college, and how they sought out resources and people to help them with decisions, issues they didn't understand. First-generation students talked about their specific challenges. For example, one student said something like this:

Because my parents didn’t go to college; they weren’t always able to provide me the advice I needed. So it was sometimes hard to figure out what classes to take and what I wanted to do in the future. But there are other people who can provide that advice, and I learned that I needed to rely on my adviser more than other students.

Using a "difference-education" approach, these students had higher grade-point averages and took better advantage of college resources than peers who didn't participate in the discussion. This study, "Closing the Social-Class Achievement Gap," offers a new approach to help them advance in college: discuss class differences rather than ignore them." FGC students gained a framework to understand how their backgrounds shaped their own experiences and how to see this as an asset," said MarYam Hamedani, a co-author on the paper.

Social psychologist Judith Harackiewicz and her colleagues at the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted research, published in the Journal of Educational Psychology, and showed that a simple writing intervention helped reduce the gap between first-generation students and their continuing-generation peers by 50 percent. Values affirmation interventions, which are short written exercises ask students to reflect on their personal values. Researchers believe these interventions work by helping students become more resilient and self-assured. Students learn to interpret typical adversity and setbacks as isolated events rather than as representative of an inadequacy inherent to their identity group. The researchers claim that these interventions can also have long-lasting effects, with ‘affirmed’ students performing better over a number of years. So while such interventions may seem “objectively small”—said leading values-affirmation
Theorist Geoffrey Cohen at a recent lecture at Columbia University—they are “subjectively large” for disadvantaged students.

The Wal-Mart Foundation wanted to address the issues of FGCS and awarded the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) two generous grants to support CIC member institutions’ efforts to enhance the success of first-generation college students. In the first wave of the CIC/Wal-Mart College Success Awards project, 20 institutions received $100,000 grants. As a result of an additional grant in 2010, 30 more CIC member institutions were awarded funds aimed at enhancing programs that promote the success of first-generation students. One program brings them to campus early to help FGCS acquire both social and cultural capital.

Many are concerned that the distinctive challenges facing first-generation students present themselves long before they arrive on campus in the fall. They may well need support, early on, to follow through on their plans to attend college. Many colleges provide pre-semester summer programs often referred to as “summer bridge” programs. Bridge programs may address how to find one’s way around campus, how to use the library, how to interact with faculty and staff, the language of the academy, the expectations of professors, the significance of college traditions and the wide range of services offered at the typical college or university. They also give students a chance to bond with one another, to experience some of the fun and informal aspects of college life, and to meet faculty and staff members with whom they will be working through their college years.

According to the participating colleges, one of the most popular means of reaching and working with first-generation students, is to forge ongoing, meaningful, one-on-one connections between those students and others on campus. The experiences of the many colleges and universities that build mentoring into their programming for first-generation students discovered
that peer mentors—people who are, or have been, first-generation college students themselves, and especially current students—are, in important respects, the most effective mentors. Effective mentoring requires ongoing contact and communication. “...To foster relationships between first-generation college students at Heritage University and faculty, staff, alumni, or community-member mentors, with the goal to help students feel a sense of belonging in college, develop a sense of purpose and a vision for their lives, distinguish themselves academically, graduate, and move on to rewarding graduate studies or professions.” —Stated purpose of Heritage Stars Mentoring Program, Heritage University, WA.

Heritage University faculty has also created a new video series, through its Institute for Student Identity and Success, in order to help faculty and instructors better serve FGCS in the classroom. “This series grew from the idea that students learn many of the practices and skills that lead to academic success subliminally, through socialization, rather than being directly told or taught them. First-generation students, because they tend to be educated in schools and grow up in homes where such signaling may happen less, often come into college with fewer of those skills. Through a survey of students and in-depth interviews with the professors emerged a set of practices or theories that, validated by research in other settings, seemed to work with first-generation students and help them from feeling overwhelmed or discouraged. Each instructor then filmed a video describing the practice and how to implement it. The videos are all under five minutes.”(HU, 2015)

At Seattle Central Community College, a new program has been launched to inspire first-generation students to finish their postsecondary education. Dubbed the "First Generation" Project, this program is designed to provide the support these students need to survive the tough transition into college life. According to The Seattle Medium, the cornerstone of the project is a
website that provides true stories from Seattle Central's students and staff who were first-generation students themselves.

“Since 1988, the California State University at Long Beach Partners Program, which is a collaborative effort between the divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Services, has matched first-generation students with a seasoned faculty member who serves as a formal mentor, advisor and friend. Partners’ primary goal is to assist students in having a well-rounded college experience while they successfully work toward and earn their college degree. Through academic, personal, social and career advisement, a mentor is a “partner” who helps the student reach his or her goals. Mentoring activities can include lunch meetings, tutoring, leadership and communication skills development, co-presenting at conferences, resume writing, graduate school preparation and networking for internships and jobs” (Meynard-Fulthorp, 2015).

In July 2014, The CIC/Wal-Mart Foundation Symposium on First-Generation Students was the culmination of a multi-year project to identify and disseminate best practices in retaining and graduating first-generation college students. DeBaun 2014, spoke of creative suggestions from some of the colleges who attended the symposium. For example, freshmen who attended seven check-in sessions during their first year were given a $150 book store gift card the month before their sophomore year. Another school found success by handing out “first-generation friendly” stickers for faculty and staff offices, much like the GLBTQ “safe space” stickers on many campuses nationwide, so that students know where they can go for some advice. These practices start to build a campus atmosphere that acknowledges and welcomes first-generation students. A walk through campus buildings at the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Cincinnati will give students an opportunity to meet other first-gens. Professors in Arts and Sciences who are first-generation college students themselves have decorated their office doors
with Gen-1 stickers. These symbols are an effort by the college to stimulate conversation between current first-generation students and the professors who have successfully finished college and went on to earn PhDs. Students are encouraged to talk with faculty about their experiences and learn possible ways to navigate their journeys.

Just recently, personal stories were shared during a dinner for Princeton University students and faculty who are among the first in their families to attend college. The casual meal was one of the recurring "first-gen" dinners co-hosted by Vice President for Campus Life Cynthia Cherrey and Dean of the Faculty Deborah Prentice. "The dinners are one of the many initiatives to create greater support and resources for students from first-generation and lower socioeconomic backgrounds," said Cherrey, who was the first in her family from rural Minnesota to attend college.”(Aronson, 2015)

Many of the interventions described in this paper are low cost, involve social media, and prove to be effective in addressing the intrapersonal struggles of the FGC students. They serve as models for other community colleges interested in assisting and retaining the FGC students when they arrive on campus.

**Suggestions for Community Colleges**

The joint legislative agenda for the 113th congress claimed that Community colleges have an essential role in returning the United States to world leadership in higher education attainment. “Community colleges educate nearly half of America’s undergraduate students, and they are the primary access point to higher education for millions of historically underrepresented populations, first-generation college students, and those currently in the workforce who lack the higher education needed in the 21st-century economy.” Community colleges have an awesome responsibility in ensuring that FGCS meet the demands of the college environment.
When surveyed students were asked what they would recommend to colleges, they responded with the following ideas. Instructors need to be on the lookout for FGCS students since it might be a hard adjustment for many. Discussions with college professors and staff can help FGCS students to overcome some of the obstacles that they might confront during their college years. Some felt that support for FGCS families was critical in ensuring an easier transition. If college staff was more open and available to assist students and families when they are seeking information it will help FGCS to make more effective choices. Assigning peer mentors and counselors for FGCS was perceived as important and necessary. According to (Phinney & Haas 2003), Social support would include the availability of tangible help, guidance, and emotional support. Coping would include seeking and receiving support from others. The results of their study showed that students rated seeking support as the most successful coping strategy and significantly more successful than avoidance.

My suggestions for community colleges address the academic, social and cultural concerns of first generation college students. An example of a pre-college initiative that can be funded by the community college involves establishing a task force made up of high school and college staff to discuss some of the precollege practices for FGC students that can be implemented at the high school level.

Perhaps high school curriculum can aligned with college expectations so FG students can better meet community college academic challenges. If FG high school students show under-preparedness more funding can go towards providing FG students with mentors. A buddy system between a college and FG high school student can benefit both students. Once FGC students receive the pre-college supports to get into community colleges then the colleges must continue providing for them after they arrive at the community college.
To address FGC student concerns about belonging, Community colleges can provide ongoing seminars where FGC alumni can come in and tell their success stories and how they were able to overcome their background experiences.

Engaging FGC students in community service projects while in college demonstrates the potential to improve their lives and the lives of others and helps build a sense of community.

Community colleges may want to start a summer bridge program. FGC students can get a head start during a few weeks by enrolling in a college course, taking quizzes, and getting the opportunity to find their way around campus. It can also help FGC students meet peers from different family and cultural backgrounds and help prepare them to interact with the diverse students on their campus. Interacting with peers helps socialize FGC students to the norms and expectations of college life. Making personal connections with FGC students makes a major difference in motivating FGC students to persist in college. They can make fast friends and support each other. It might help them overcome their unsophisticated speech patterns and battled potential alienation from their families. This kind of bonding can go a long way toward overcoming the same hurdles. It can be empowering and encouraging to win the battle for upward mobility with peers who are working against similar odds at the same time.

Classroom instructors can create learning environments that include discussions and critical thinking that are culturally validating. Curriculum and classroom discussions can lead students to examine their own history and family ties and then reevaluate how they view themselves. FGC students need to feel that their ideas, input, and lived experience matter. It is important that FGC students recognize that they do not need to conform to the dominant culture. It is also important that they trust their instructors and believe that their instructors not only care about them, but that they are truly vested in their best interests and want them to succeed.
Community colleges cannot claim to want diversity on campus as a public good if they do not embrace an understanding of the FGC students and recognize that FGC students have been underserved. Investing in many of these low cost interventions can have a huge impact on the success of the FGC community college student. Therefore, there is no reason for community colleges to not start implementing them now.

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