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Advising the First-Generation College Student: Effective Retention Tools for Colleges and Universities

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Defining the First-Generation College Student

A recent review of literature reveals that researchers have used different definitions of the "first-generation" concept (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Billson & Terry, 1982). Bean and Metzner (1985) examined the research on the positive correlation between parental education and first-generation college students' persistence and reported that other researchers found equivocal results when examining this relationship. Billson and Terry (1987) argued, however, that the analysis performed by Bean and Metzner (1985) was confounded by their definition of nontraditional students (part-time, commuter, or older than 24 years of age) and by their assumption that first-generation college students are commuters from blue-collar families. Billson and Terry (1982) defined first-generation college students as those whose parents have had no college or university experience. This article defines first-generation college students similarly.

Because first-generation college students may be perceived as having different expectations, poorer academic and social preparation, greater financial constraints, lower self-esteem, and insufficient parental support, it would seem logical to suggest that they do not perform as well as other college students. The increased accessibility of higher education to first-generation students, especially minorities, necessitates a clearer understanding of this perceived relationship because their enrollment in colleges and universities has dramatically grown. Additionally, because support in the form of basic information about college survival and success may not be readily available from families of first-generation students, there is a need for more extensive research to determine the nature and type of academic support systems needed for this population's successful adjustment to college.

Academic Advising and the First-Generation College Student

In this article, I attempt to outline an academic support system that colleges and universities can use in an effort to retain first-generation college students. In terms of actual performance, previous studies have shown that first-generation college students may not fit the model of ideal students by being well-prepared, having earned good grades in high school, having the self-esteem and self-efficacy to succeed, and having enough familial and financial support to dedicate themselves full-time to becoming a well-rounded graduate.

Hicks (2002) provided some interesting findings about first-generation college students and their parents that may be generalized to other colleges and universities that have large populations of first-generation students. For example, Hicks's study replicates other findings in the literature that reveal that first-generation college students typically come from poorer families.

Hicks (2002) indicated that because the parent(s) of many first-generation college students didn't have the opportunity to attend college, there seems to be more parental support for their children to attend college and to do well while in college. It would seem logical that first-generation college students who receive positive family support during their college experiences are likely to possess more information about college and to be more successful in college than those students who do not receive positive family support.

Based on these and similar studies, colleges and universities could provide support to first-generation college students by taking the following actions:

1. Implement intensive counseling support groups and an intensive orientation program aimed directly at those college students who receive less parental support.

2. Implement programs that would involve the parents of these first-generation college students. After these students are interviewed and accepted to the college or university, the school could provide a welcome orientation/reception program designed for parents to familiarize them with different academic support systems that the college or university may offer. In support of student retention, this method recognizes the family system as a key component and views parents as integral partners in their children's success.

3. Implement a first-year experience course that includes effective tools for combating the lack of academic support for first-generation students. This course would allow the first-generation student to learn about the resources that a university has to offer and about course expectations of faculty members. In addition, the curriculum of this course should include topics that may benefit the first-generation college student such as understanding the goals of the college or university, choosing a major and planning a career, making ethical decisions, and learning time management skills to support academic success.

4. Implement other programs to provide additional support for first-generation students who may lack academic, personal, social, and/or parental support. These programs might include first-year interest groups, residence living groups, and seminar memberships that would continue into a student's sophomore year; community-building activities that last through the sophomore year; strong tutorial and supplemental instruction, along with integrated study groups; and extracurricular activities that bond students, faculty, staff, and the institution.

In closing, implementing programs such as these, especially when they involve the collaborative efforts of student affairs and academic affairs through academic support systems and course curricula, can provide a strong system to meet the academic, personal, and social needs of first-generation college students and to increase their retention through graduation.

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