Chapter 2

Ask About Me:
The Self–Efficacy of First–Generation Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will serve as a literature review of first-generation college students. The authors will discuss the definition of being first-generation. Additionally, there will be concentration on the barriers faced at both the pre-college and college levels, along with recommendations for individual and institutional support. To further highlight the self-efficacy of first-generation students, personal narratives will be used to tell their stories about their own experiences. Lastly, using a strengths-based model approach, the authors will uncover what institutions can do to recruit but retain this student population.

INTRODUCTION

One-third of all higher education students in the United States are the first in their families to attend college or first-generation students (FGS) (Cataldi et al., 2018). An FGS has unique challenges that impact the ability to access, persist, and graduate (Ishitani, 2016). Barriers to education begin before FGS enroll in higher education

institutions. Challenges for FGS extend from pre-college conditions beyond students' control. It is necessary to identify and address FGS barriers at all educational levels.

As many institutions face enrollment and retention issues, many colleges have implemented programs and strategies to retain several populations, especially FGS. One retention strategy used is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's perceived capability to perform necessary tasks to achieve goals (Bandura, 1997 as cited in Banks et al., 2019). Among the many strategies employed, researchers continue to study the self-efficacy of FGS to explain why some persist while facing steep barriers. Berbery and O'Brien (2018) suggested that GPA, parental support and environmental barriers can affect self-efficacy in Latino students. However, the authors would argue that these factors could be the same for all first-generation students depending on their specific situation. This chapter examines the issues surrounding first-generation student status at the high school and college levels and offers recommendations to institutions for best supporting this vital population of students.

BACKGROUND

College enrollment has dropped across the country, with undergraduate enrollment down four percent in 2020 compared to 2019 and first-time student enrollment down 16.1 percent nationally (Sutton, 2021). With fewer students deciding to pursue higher education, colleges and universities risk the loss of revenue and other long-term consequences. As a result, schools must reassess how to prepare, recruit, and offer services to attract more students and specific populations.

One student population receiving considerable attention is FGS or students whose parents do not have more than a high school education (Swecker et al., 2013). The definition of FGS is disputed among researchers; however, there is consensus that FGS face a disadvantage in their college education compared to their non-first-generation peers. FGS lack critical knowledge of the higher education process creating more significant challenges in transitioning to college and threatening persistence to a degree (Westbrook and Scott, 2012). One-third of all higher education students identify as FGS (Cataldi et al., 2018). FGS are a large student population with well-documented barriers; therefore, education institutions must reconsider how they serve the FGS population at all levels of education to ensure their readiness and encourage their enrollment and retainment.

The research presents first-generation status as a deficit that students must overcome before achieving success. However, FGS come to college campuses with unique skills, assets, and motivations that help them succeed (Mincozzi & Roda, 2020). In addition, the campus environment has also been found to positively influence the sense of belonging in FGS (Museus & Chang, 2021). Therefore, instead of focusing

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