Chapter 14
A Typology of Supports for First Generation College Students in the U.S.
The Role of Leadership and Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

First generation college students, students who are the first in their families to enroll in college, are a unique group, in that their parents' level of education in addition to their race, gender, or socioeconomic status, is an indicator of persistence to degree completion. While colleges and universities have historically created programs to assist this group, those initiatives have ranged in purpose, level of institutional and/ or government support, and intended audience. This chapter develops a typology of the support programs that currently exist to serve first generation college students attending four-year colleges and universities in the United States. It begins by exploring the academic and financial challenges many first generation college students face, and concludes by offering recommendations that institutional policymakers can implement to expand the possibilities for improving the success of this distinctive group of students.

INTRODUCTION

Given the widening gap of income inequality (Saez & Zucman, 2014) and the decline of social mobility in the United States (Chetty, Hendren, Kline, & Saez, 2014), along with ample research on the economic returns to higher education (Arias & McMahon, 2001; Ashenfelter & Zimmerman, 1997; Bhuller, Mogstad, & Salvanes, 2014; Carnoy, 1997; Jaeger & Page, 1996; Psacharopoulos, 1994; Rouse, 1999), addressing these social issues may be done through increasing the number of students who receive formal, post-secondary education and are the first in their families to do so. These students – first generation college

students – stand to gain the most social mobility through economic returns to postsecondary education (Bowen, Kurzweil, Tobin, & Pichler, 2006). Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that adults without a college degree earn less and are more likely to be unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Because they enter college from a relatively low socioeconomic background, completing college will likely increase their wages and standard of living above that of their parents, allowing for intergenerational social mobility (Duncan & Murnane, 2011; Fiske & Markus, 2012; Hout & Janus, 2011). In contrast to this, students whose parents received postsecondary education, upon completing college are likely only to match their parents' standards of living. While there have, historically, been programs that support first generation college students, these programs have been diverse in goals and implementation, ranging from addressing financial concerns to deficits in academic skills to cultural issues (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). This chapter offers a typology of the student supports for first generation college students currently in use in the United States for understanding the ways in which universities are currently working to improve college completion rates for these kinds of students.

BACKGROUND

This vignette, taken from an opinion article in the New York Times printed in 2015, offers an introduction to the experiences of first generation college students. This personal story offers a direct insight into the special challenges that first generation college students face. Discussion of these challenges is provided in context with this vignette immediately preceding it.

…a week into classes, I received the topics for what would be my first college paper, in an English course on the modern novel. I might as well have been my non-English-speaking grandmother trying to read and understand them: The language felt that foreign. I called my mom at work and in tears told her that I had to come home, that I'd made a terrible mistake.

She sighed into the phone and said: "Just read me the first question. We'll go through it a little at a time and figure it out."

I read her the topic slowly, pausing after each sentence, waiting for her to say something. The first topic was two paragraphs long. I remember it had the word intersectionalities in it. And the word gendered. And maybe the phrase theoretical framework. I waited for her response and for the ways it would encourage me, for her to tell me I could do this, that I would eventually be the first in my family to graduate from college.

"You're right," she said after a moment. "You're screwed."

Other parents — parents who have gone to college themselves — might have known at that point to encourage their kid to go to office hours, or to the writing center, or to ask for help. But my mom thought I was as alone as I feared.

"I have no idea what any of that means," she said. "I don't even know how it's a question."

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