

## Chapter 9

# The Challenges Behind Living a Double Life Among First- Generation University Students: The Clash Between Interdependent and Independent Identities

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### **ABSTRACT**

*First-generation (F.G.) university students whose parents did not attend college comprise 30-50% of those pursuing higher education in the United States. Research suggests that compared with those whose parents attended college, F.G. students are less likely to graduate. American universities reflect upper middle class values, implying that academic success requires students' independence from family. Previous research suggests that F.G., compared with non-F.G. students, place a greater value on interdependence relative to independence. The current study was a multi-method investigation involving quantitative and qualitative assessment approaches. Specifically, on standardized measures, F.G. students scored significantly higher on the Communal Orientation Scale, reflecting norms of social reciprocity and attentiveness to others. Results of qualitative interviews indicated that F.G. students are often self-conscious about their family status more likely to experience university culture as ambiguous and frequently overwhelming and lack a knowledgeable support system.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The standard definition of first-generation students are students whose parents do not have a Bachelor's or Associate's degree (Stephens et al., 2012). While exact percentages vary across four-year institutions, it is estimated that up to 50% of community college students and 30% of university students are first-generation (F.G.) students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2012; Weaver, 2011). College retention studies have consistently found that parental educational status is one of the strongest predictors of whether young adults would attend or complete college (Stephens et al. 2012). By implication, students whose parents did not complete college are at higher risk of dropping out. There are probably multiple reasons for this pattern.

Historically, those attending college have been from middle to upper socioeconomic classes, emphasizing the importance of emerging adults developing personal independence. However, as the pool of college students has grown, more students from America's non-dominant cultures have enrolled in community colleges and universities. For example, while students of Latinx background are more likely to begin college than European Americans, they are less likely to graduate (Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2015).

### **First Generation Students**

With over 60% of U.S. high school graduates pursuing postsecondary education, the backgrounds of contemporary college students are increasingly diverse. This diversity extends to the familial and educational experience of incoming university students. In particular, the relative proportion of college students whose parents did not complete postsecondary education is likely to increase. F. G. students often begin university at an academic disadvantage (Pascarella et al., 2004). Also, reading and critical thinking skills are less developed, and F.G.s complete fewer college-prep math courses (Chen, 2005) during high school. Their choice of colleges is likely to be limited by lower high school GPAs compared with non-F.G. students whose parents attended college (Spiegler & Bedarnek, 2013). Once they enter college, F.G. students complete fewer credit hours and have lower grade point averages (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Schwartz et al., 2018). As a group, F.G. students are about 50% less likely to complete college than continuing-generation (non-F.G.) students. In addition, F.G. students discontinue their college careers early –with 70% of F.G. dropouts leaving in the first academic year (Ishitani, 2003; Pratt et al., 2017). Compared with non-F.G. students, F.G. students appear to experience greater financial stress. They are more likely to be employed during the academic year and work more hours (Spiegler & Bednarek, 2013). Employment demands are likely to contribute to the consistent finding of reduced integration of F.G. students into the campus community. With lower levels of involvement in extracurricular activities, F.G. students report less of a sense of belonging on college campuses (Pascarella et al., 2004).

These observations have led universities to develop programs to address the specific characteristics of F.G. students. The foci of these programs have included peer mentoring (Demetriou et al. 2017), study skills, and instruction in “self-regulatory strategies” (Wiborwiski, Matthews, & Kitsantas, 2016). In addition, a more recent emphasis has included accelerated academic programs for college-bound high school students, such as advanced placement courses and dual enrollment (Lation et al., 2018). The less-than-optimal educational background, financial pressures, and reduced integration into campus life are all likely to contribute to these reduced F.G. student graduation rates. However, reliance on these structural

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