

# An Empirical Review of Retention: Student–Instructor Relationships with First-Generation Medical Assistant Students

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*Instructor engagement with first-generation medical assistant students is minimal, resulting in decreased graduation rates. This qualitative descriptive study describes instructor perceptions of how student–instructor relationships influence program completion with first-generation medical assistant students. Ten medical assistant instructors participated in semistructured interviews. Two research questions were addressed questioning instructor perceptions of how student–instructor relationships influence program completion and perceptions of influential engagement strategies supporting program completion with first-generation students in medical assistant programs. The results included college readiness concerns, dynamics of health science education, unique challenges of first-generation students, engagement strategies, and complex factors influencing student engagement.*

Key words: first-generation, engagement, retention, student–instructor relationships

The relationship between students and instructors is necessary for student retention efforts in higher education institutions (Ajayi et al., 2021; Haverila & Haverila, 2021). The relationship between students and instructors involves instructors motivating and engaging students to learn (Haverila & Haverila, 2021). Instructors establishing a student–instructor relationship requires meaningful engagement throughout the learning environment (Delfino, 2019). Instructors developing student–instructor relationships impact students’ academic progression, affecting program and institutional retention efforts (Parnes et al., 2020).

First-generation students are students whose parent(s) have not completed a college degree (Conefrey, 2021). First-generation students are part of an underrepresented student population. Underrepresented student groups can differ from their counterparts in academic preparedness, significant obstacles to beginning a college education, and unique challenges in completing a degree program (Ajayi et al., 2021; Conefrey, 2021). Key contributing factors to first-generation student success are retention rates, financial hardships, student motivation, and course failure.

Instructor engagement with first-generation medical assistant students is minimal, resulting in decreased graduation rates in medical assistant programs (Martin, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019). A major contributing factor to student success and retention is the relationship a student has with an instructor (Martin, 2019). Student–instructor relationships can positively or negatively impact student retention and the student’s overall college experience (Miller & Mills, 2019). Therefore, instructors who do not actively work to establish relationships with students create negative classroom/ learning environments, which deter student success (Martin, 2019).

This qualitative descriptive study was to describe perceptions of instructors regarding how student–instructor relationships influence program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program. Two research questions were addressed in this study: (a) What are instructor perceptions of how student–instructor relationships influence program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program? (b) What are instructor perceptions of successful student engagement strategies that influence student–instructor relationships supporting program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program?

## Literature Review

A major consideration in colleges and universities is the ongoing goal to increase student retention and graduation rates (LeMire et al., 2021). Access to higher education has increased over time; however, retention and persistence are still

concerns for underrepresented and diverse student populations, such as first-generation college students (Tinto, 1994, 2006). Tinto (1994) found that retention programs can help some students complete a college program. However, limitations and concerns about retention programs' impact on the quality of students' educational experiences are apparent. According to Roberts (2018), additional concerns among underrepresented and diverse student populations are noted in student engagement, academic preparedness, financial literacy, student development, and student support.

Health science programs exhibit a fundamental tension between excellence and accessibility. Current educational perspectives focus on the complexity of specialized knowledge and practical competencies (Forero et al., 2022). Forero et al. (2022) discovered that training in health sciences involves a significant amount of instructional time facilitating practical activities and developing the associated competencies. Medical assistant competencies include clinical and traditional instruction in a dedicated clinical environment. Therefore, in practical aspects, course design, clinical instruction, and learning experiences can vary from those in general education (Novak et al., 2019).

A significant concern with first-generation learners is retention: the ability to stay within the suggested course outline and complete the program as scheduled (Collier & Morgan, 2008). First-generation students typically have lower grade point averages than their counterparts and have higher withdrawal rates (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Additionally, first-generation college students encounter significant obstacles in achieving academic success (Petty, 2014). The issue of student retention in higher education surfaced more than 40 years ago (Tinto, 2006). Still, controversial theories regarding student motivation and its connection to student retention exist (Loya, 2014; Tinto, 2006).

Two motivational theories and a student development identity theory were used as the conceptual framework for this study. Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, a human motivational theory, focuses on understanding one's motivation. McClelland's (1987) human motivation theory is founded on motivational factors that fall into three motivator categories to meet one's needs: the need for achievement, the need for affiliation, and the need for power. Chickering's theory of identity development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993) outlines seven vectors of student identity development. Maslow's hierarchy of needs, McClelland's human motivation theory, and Chickering's theory of identity development focus on motivational factors (intrinsic and extrinsic) and student development to achieve the overarching goal of achievement and self-actualization (Mahandre & Akram, 2021; Shi & Lin, 2020).

The exploration into descriptions of instructor perceptions regarding how student–instructor relationships influence program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program can contribute to the larger body of knowledge in health science education. Medical assistant instructors can benefit from the research data by identifying instructor perceptions of successful student engagement strategies that influence student–instructor relationships supporting program completion with first-generation students. Furthermore, the study findings may aid in developing or enhancing training opportunities, such as professional development seminars on supporting first-generation students through student–instructor relationships.

## Method and Design

A qualitative method was chosen as the most appropriate method for this study on the basis of the research problem and the purpose of the study. A variation in qualitative study designs requires a slightly different emphasis when evaluating the research; therefore, ensuring the appropriateness of the method and design is vital (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The systematic nature of qualitative research involves carefully identifying the problem, collecting information, analyzing the data, explaining the outcomes, evaluating, and interpreting the data (Nassaji, 2020). Unlike quantitative and mixed methods, qualitative researchers allow for intuitive data collection, allowing a researcher to understand the participants’ perceptions in their natural settings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

Qualitative research in natural settings is best suited to understanding an individual’s experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Rutberg & Bouikidis, 2018). Additionally, qualitative research allows for collecting robust descriptive information through interviews, observations, or focus groups to explore and gain an understanding (Doyle et al., 2020). Conversely, quantitative research is not descriptive but statistical through manipulating numerical data to distinguish variables of how much or how many (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in the data collection process and the findings of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this descriptive study was to describe perceptions of instructors regarding how student–instructor relationships influence program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program rather than to quantify statistical data.

Although qualitative research can represent several characteristics, considering the purpose of the study, variations in the research design require a different approach to how qualitative research is designed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The use of a descriptive design aligned with the goal of this study to explore and understand how instructor perceptions of how student–instructor relationships influence program

completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program. Descriptive designs are especially beneficial in the field of education, specifically health care education, in which direct impacts in the learning setting are evident (Doyle et al., 2020). Although a descriptive study was deemed the most appropriate research design, other designs, such as narrative inquiry and phenomenology, were considered for this study but were ultimately deemed inappropriate.

Narrative inquiry and phenomenology designs employ similar data collection processes. However, distinct differences in the emphasis and extent of data collection deem a descriptive study the most appropriate design. Narrative inquiry research can yield perceptions about experiences; however, much of the content formed in this design focuses on the meaning of the experience through storytelling rather than the experience itself (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Although phenomenology studies can involve research seeking to gain a perspective, a phenomenology study requires understanding broader philosophical assumptions with information focused on explaining a phenomenon by reporting how the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this study was not to examine the personal experiences, phenomena, or lived encounters connected to instructors of first-generation students in a medical assistant program. Therefore, a descriptive study was chosen over narrative inquiry and phenomenology designs to adequately address the problem and thoroughly report the findings that represent descriptive perceptions and directly reflect the research questions.

## **Setting, Population, and Sample**

The population for this study consisted of instructors of first-generation students in a medical assistant program within one college in the Northeastern region of the United States and nationwide from LinkedIn. A purposive sampling process was used to select faculty who met participation criteria. The sample for this study consisted of 10 participants who were instructors of first-generation medical assistant students participating in any form of synchronous, asynchronous, or synchronous/asynchronous combined (blended) learning modalities. The instructors' experience in higher education ranged from 1–5 years to 21 or more years. Additionally, the ethnic background consisted of White and Black or African American instructors in the age range of 25–74.

## **Validity and Reliability**

One-on-one semistructured interviews were scheduled with participants, and open-ended questions regarding student–instructor relationships and student engagement were asked during individual interviews. To ensure the credibility,

validity, and reliability of this study, quality standards were implemented to ensure accurate collection and proper handling of all collected data. An interview protocol was designed to ask distinct questions for participants to share their perceptions. A field test was conducted to review the interview questions and ensure they were clear, concise, relevant, nonbiased, and appropriate for the study. Furthermore, a systemic approach was used that included member checking, coding, and multistep data analysis to achieve an accurate and complete understanding of the problem and increase credibility (Nassaji, 2020).

## **Data Collection and Analysis Procedure**

Data collection began after receiving institutional review board (IRB) approval and after all institutional and participant consent forms, approvals, and permissions were granted. Data collection focused on aligning each research question to one or more interview questions. A multistep process of analyzing data in cycles involved the following five steps.

### **Step 1: Precoding Data Analysis**

All audio recordings from each interview were manually transcribed. Transcripts were sent to each participant, and member checked to allow participants to check for validity and ensure that information was correct and accurately reported. After validation, each transcript was thoroughly read, analyzed, and compiled to ensure data familiarity before coding began.

### **Step 2: First-Cycle Coding**

Data were initially reviewed during the first cycle by importing each interview transcript into NVivo software to identify keywords and phrases to refine the document. Open coding was initiated by highlighting keywords and phrases from the interviews. The codes were then transferred to a separate document in Microsoft Excel v. 16, a data entry, storage, analysis, and visualization software tool.

### **Step 3: Second-Cycle Coding**

A second cycle of coding continued in an Excel spreadsheet. A second manual coding cycle—descriptive coding—followed the first-cycle coding process. The second coding cycle was used to further analyze, categorize, and refine the interview data. Upon completion of coding, all codes/data were reviewed, organized, and analyzed.

### **Step 4: Thematic Analysis**

The second cycling process continued with a constant comparison analysis until data were refined and themes were emergent. Once themes began to emerge, additional refinement was necessary. Themes were then refined, and a thematic analysis

proceeded to report themes. Themes were identified to summarize the meaning of the data. The research questions were reviewed in conjunction with the conceptual framework, the purpose of the study, and the themes.

**Step 5: Review and Summarize**

Data were sorted on the basis of similarities in meaning and themes to organize the results to answer the research questions. A comprehensive summary of the results was written.

**Findings**

The findings of this study resulted in four themes that reflect instructors’ perceptions of student–instructor engagement with first-generation students in a medical assistant program. Table 1 represents the themes identified to answer the research questions.

**Table 1**

*Alignment of Themes with Research Questions*

Themes	Research Questions
Theme 2: Variances in Perceptions of Job Roles and Responsibilities	RQ1: What are instructor perceptions of how student–instructor relationships influence program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program?
Theme 4: Inadequately Prepared First-Generation Students	
Theme 1: Engagement Strategies Specifically for First-Generation Students	
Theme 3: Understanding Unique Needs of First-Generation Students	RQ2: What are instructor perceptions of successful student engagement strategies that influence student–instructor relationships supporting program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program?

## Results

### **THEME 1: ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES SPECIFICALLY FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

The first theme emerged from participants who viewed it imperative for instructors to have first-generation students identify themselves as such. Participants viewed first-generation student identification as a primary factor in their engagement strategies. Instructors noted that student introductions at the beginning of a new course provided students an opportunity to introduce and share something about themselves. P1 described this introduction portion of the class as the ideal time to ask, “Has anyone in your family been to college or graduated from college?” Several participants indicated that knowing who the first-generation students were was essential to addressing this student group adequately.

All participants described a variation acknowledging the importance of student–instructor engagement with first-generation students. However, challenges and variations in engagement strategies, including the degree to which engagement was required, were noted. Many participants noted communication challenges as an ongoing concern in engaging, connecting, motivating, and supporting first-generation students. Participants explained the preceding challenges as daily engagement challenges and emphasized class modality as an additional challenge associated with student engagement.

Participants engaging with students online noted that asynchronous learning posed an additional challenge of connecting to engage and develop a student–instructor relationship. The additional challenge in asynchronous learning, where student engagement is often low, was minimal opportunities to get to know the students and what they needed to be successful. P4 shared that despite taking attendance, they never engaged with or saw certain students face-to-face because the students were compliant in submitting assignments and meeting due dates, so there was “no need to reach out.” Several participants commented about the significant lack of communication, attendance, and engagement with online learners and described multiple challenges in implementing strategies, especially explicitly engaging with first-generation students.

Effective communication was a common keyword among participants. Participants described a significant challenge in communicating with their first-generation students, indicating a substantial barrier in effective communication impacting engagement. The instructors’ inability to effectively communicate with first-generation students affected student–instructor engagement and created additional academic, social, mental, and emotional challenges for first-generation students.

Instructors' understanding of Chickering's theory of student identity aids in recognizing an individual's development as a college student and the ability to initiate and sustain engagement (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Harris, 2020). Further, student identity development is contingent on students communicating, students engaging with instructors, and instructors meeting student needs. Communication and engagement also support student motivation and achievement as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Goldman et al., 2021; Maslow, 1954).

## **THEME 2: VARIANCES IN PERCEPTIONS OF JOB ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The second theme emerged from participants' descriptions of job responsibilities as medical assistant instructors when referencing student engagement. When discussing engagement strategies, various responses were received in which some participants described a nonchalant attitude toward engaging students. P9 explained that their affiliated institution frequently recommended students use school resources and student services, stating, "You know, it's on campus, but, um, we're here to educate." P9 further shared, "It's more of a hand-holding thing, you know; some teachers are like, well, I'm not here to hold their hand; they're college students."

All participants described their perception of student-instructor engagement; however, variations in engagement concerning what instructors perceived as their job as an instructor were apparent. No institutional protocols for student engagement were mentioned when interviewing the participants. Instructors shared vastly different perceptions of student-instructor engagement requirements with first-generation students in a medical assistant program. Some participants explained that the engagement strategies used applied to all students. Conversely, another participant at the same institution explained how they do not make any distinctions with first-generation students in their classes.

Garger et al. (2022) found instructional leadership a significant prediction in various contexts of student engagement, which correlates to instructors' leadership behaviors in the classroom. Participants described different methods of classroom leadership, in which the primary focus for many was on instruction and not student engagement. Recognizing the instructors' leadership styles is helpful when contrasting the student-instructor dynamic. Leadership styles, however, are one consideration in understanding the various levels of engagement, support, motivation, and lack thereof that an instructor might exhibit in establishing a student-instructor relationship with first-generation students in a medical assistant program (Dickerson et al., 2021).

Regardless of an instructor's leadership style, Dickerson et al. (2021) found that optimal classroom learning stems from an atmosphere of support, instructor-to-student, and student-to-instructor. An instructor's leadership behaviors or lack

thereof are directly connected to the quality of teaching and consequently affect students' learning quality (Romanovskiy et al., 2019). Achievement motivation within McClelland's (1987) human motivation theory closely relates to the work (instructor) and school (student) success dynamic in higher education sectors. Conversely, motivation—as outlined in Maslow's hierarchy of needs—in educational work often relates to job-related and institutional goals that impact student and instructor motivation (Maslow, 1954; Steinmayr et al., 2019).

### **THEME 3: UNDERSTANDING UNIQUE NEEDS OF FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS CHALLENGES**

One of the main concerns among the participants of this study was the challenges exclusively faced by first-generation students in a medical assistant program, caused by their unique needs. Several participants noted that to understand the needs of first-generation students, instructors need to know their challenges. P7 explained the importance of instructors realizing that there may be a language barrier with first-generation students, and stated, "I have to realize that they don't know the same vernacular that educators do, you know." P7 compared a first-generation student stepping into a classroom with someone unfamiliar with math stepping into an accounting office: "People in education don't always realize that we use a different language than people outside." Struggles with communication were apparent in the interviews and noted by nearly all participants.

Challenges creating unique needs for first-generation students were an overarching theme in this study. Participants in this study indicated various challenges with instructing, engaging, and establishing a relationship with first-generation students. The extensive challenges of first-generation students created unique needs for this student group. Compared with current literature in this area, the findings of this study are consistent with those of Castillo-Montoya and Ives (2020), who reiterated that much of the current literature on first-generation students largely focuses on their personal challenges and systematic barriers. Still, instructors do not clearly understand who first-generation students are as learners in higher education to better prepare for academic instruction (Castillo-Montoya & Ives, 2020).

Concerns exist about lacking an in-depth understanding of how first-generation students' behavior and characteristics further factor into the gap of first-generation students (Wang et al., 2022). Participants in this study described various negative personality traits and academic obstacles among first-generation students. Participants explained that personal and educational challenges intensified as first-generation students began practical medical assistant courses. Participants indicated that factors of anxiety, comfort, fear, defeat, and intimidation created academic obstacles. According to Wang et al. (2022), for first-generation students to

be successful, students need to gain skills and strategies to cope with the demands of higher education.

Chickering's theory of identify development identifies three types of competence that college students develop as the student works through seven intellectual, manual, and interpersonal vectors (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It is vital that instructors understand both the needs of first-generation students and how to address student challenges as first-generation students develop as college students (Wang et al., 2022). According to Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, individuals transition to students who regard school as they learn. Students desire to be fulfilled in the learning environment, motivated to succeed, and oriented to acknowledge personal growth and development through their educational journey (Dickerson et al., 2021; Harris, 2020). Goldman et al. (2021) asserted that educators increasing accessibility to students, providing access to help, and clarifying assignments can alleviate some academic obstacles for first-generation students.

#### **THEME 4: INADEQUATELY PREPARED FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

Another major concern among the participants in this study was the lack of students who are prepared for college. For instance, P9 acknowledged challenges stemming from a lack of college preparation during high school: "That comes from the high school level, even though we, all, high school, college, all of us, have the resources, those types of students don't really know how to get to those resources." Additional challenges noted by the participants were study habits, note-taking, and sending emails. The noted challenges posed barriers that made communication, building relationships, and motivating students difficult.

Participants explained how there seemed to be discrepancies in student perceptions of college-level work among first-generation students. P10 stated, "There's a misconception that this is a community college, so this is [going to] be [an] easier, um, learning process than a university." Furthermore, P10 stated that mindset is a challenge in the medical assistant program, explaining that they have students who do not know what a medical assistant actually does. According to P10, students often think, "Oh, this is medical assisting; it's not hard as nursing, so this is [going to] be [an] easier program,' then notice that it is more challenging than they thought." Other participants also described instances of explaining to first-generation medical assistant students the difference between the roles of a nurse and a medical assistant and the difference between a community college and a university.

Key phrases from the participant interviews described significantly poorly prepared first-generation students. Many participants shared that transitioning from high

school to college was challenging for new students and that most, if not all, first-generation students were not prepared for college, academically or mentally. As such, college readiness issues become more prevalent as students progress to practical medical assistant courses requiring higher critical thinking and analytical skills. Z. Xu et al. (2023) found that some instructors and administrators considered preparing students for college a shared responsibility between high schools and colleges. When comparing standards used by high schools to assess college readiness, the skills were insufficient to prepare students for college-level courses (Z. Xu et al., 2023).

Richards (2022) suggested that student behavior contributes to educational outcomes. Nearly all participants voiced that adverse effects of a student's discomfort level impact their behavior. Students' behavior, explicitly help-seeking behaviors, is believed to influence their educational experiences and their ability to transition into college. However, because first-generation students are often intimidated by instructors, the discomfort prevents students from seeking instructor help and accessing academically valuable resources (Richards, 2022). Instructors are tasked with helping students understand the value of educational resources and personal development. Hence, the correlation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Chickering's theory of identity development to support student development and motivation among first-generation students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Harris, 2020; Maslow, 1954).

## Limitations

The primary limitation of this study stemmed from institutional approvals from the selected institutions. Additionally, a participant withdrew from the study at an institution. The aforementioned limitations, which eliminated a tool for data collection and limited recruitment of participants, prompted additional IRB approvals. Additional IRB approval was obtained to expand the population to include a public LinkedIn page to solicit additional potential participants. Using LinkedIn posed a limitation on the number of participants viewing the LinkedIn page. Therefore, snowball sampling was initiated to increase LinkedIn responses.

## Implications

The education field, specifically higher education, is connected to curriculum, instruction, engagement, and leadership. Productive engagement is an important means by which students develop relationships and connectedness to the institution while participating in opportunities for learning and development (Delfino, 2019). The following recommendations to leaders and practitioners in the field of education, focusing on first-generation students, were developed from the in-depth literature review and findings within this study.

## **RECOMMENDATION 1: INCLUSION TRAINING TO ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SPECIFICALLY FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

The data analysis revealed several challenges for first-generation students and instructors, which became more prevalent in core medical assisting courses. According to Delfino (2019), constant academic practice reviews are required to promote academic excellence. Therefore, educating instructors on first-generation students' fundamental challenges and needs in medical assisting programs will allow instructors to create inclusive classrooms. Keeping academic staff updated about recent or novel approaches to evidence-based education requires continuous education and is essential for a successful program (Forero et al., 2022).

Instructors understanding the behaviors and characteristics of first-generation students in the academic setting will provide insight into the best instructional and engagement practices (Delfino, 2019). Administrators should consider inclusion training to address the challenges of explicitly engaging with first-generation students and enhance professional development, specifically for engaging and supporting first-generation students in medical assisting programs. Upon completing enhanced training, faculty and staff can implement evidence-based engagement strategies to strengthen and improve student-instructor engagement by examining challenges and needs associated with first-generation students in medical assisting programs. Content knowledge, professional development, and frequent practice are essential for instructors educating medical students (Artino & Konopasky, 2018).

## **RECOMMENDATION 2: CLEARLY DEFINED INSTRUCTOR JOB ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

The absence of universal engagement strategies in higher education is primarily associated with the lack of consistency among instructors (Hills et al., 2022). Administrators could create and reinforce uniform classroom practices by clearly defining instructor job roles and responsibilities. According to D. Xu and Solanki (2020), students noted that instructors vary substantially in how they deliver course content and interact with students. Variations in instructor engagement can lead to widespread concerns about teaching effectiveness.

The outcomes of this research included variations in the levels of student engagement considering what instructors perceived was their job as an educator. The findings of this research do not provide reasons for job role discrepancies despite participants describing similar job responsibilities. The variations in instructor perceptions of instructor job roles and responsibilities create inconsistencies in instructor engagement responsibilities (D. Xu & Solanki, 2020). Detailing clear expectations and guidelines may improve the lack of consistency in student engagement.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: ENHANCED STUDENT ORIENTATIONS FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

Studies relating to new student orientations note the critical role in student engagement (Chan, 2019). Student orientations were among the most effective engagement strategies participants noted to get to know a first-generation student. Participants found it beneficial to allow first-generation students to meet their instructors before the semester to reduce extensive communication challenges. The preliminary meetings were described as the start of developing a productive student–instructor relationship without the added pressure of the first day of class. Furthermore, positive impacts on student retention, academic performance, and psychological effects positively impact student learning skills and development (Chan, 2019).

Student–instructor engagement succeeds in relationships between students and instructors, which can be fostered by developing an opportunity to engage with the instructor (Kassab et al., 2022). The findings of this research illustrated that first-generation students in a medical assistant program were not prepared for college or practical medical assistant courses. Students were often placed in the medical assistant program by default and did not fully understand the profession. Administrators should implement or enhance program-specific student orientations for first-generation medical assistant students to increase familiarity with the program outside general education courses and improve early-on student–instructor engagement. Providing first-generation medical assistant students with a designated orientation can also clarify medical assistants’ job descriptions, including clinical and administrative duties.

### **RECOMMENDATION 4: ENHANCED FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR COURSES FOR FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS**

The findings of Timmis et al. (2022) reiterated the struggle of simultaneously obtaining new academic challenges, obtaining new social skills, and adapting as an independent learner in an unknown cultural setting as one of the most significant transitions in the life of a college student. Specifics can differ across institutions, but administrators and instructors facilitating induction-type activities can help to focus on preparing students academically. Open house was a key engagement strategy noted among participants. However, participants indicated the desire to enhance student welcome initiatives to prepare first-generation students better.

The findings of this research illustrated that regardless of the student’s age, first-generation students in a medical assistant program were not prepared for college. First-generation students represent a vast age range of students: high school graduates, returning students, and second-career learners (Conefrey, 2021).

Administrators should enhance or extend first-year seminar courses for first-generation students in medical programs. A designated first-year seminar course for first-generation students can increase familiarity with the college campus, campus resources, respective program expectations, and help acclimate new and returning first-generation students to college. The following table represents the themes with the corresponding recommendations.

**Table 2**  
*Alignment of Themes with Recommendations*

Themes	Recommendations
Theme 1: Engagement Strategies Specifically for First-Generation Students	Recommendation 1: Inclusion Training to Enhance Professional Development Specifically for First-Generation Students
Theme 2: Variances in Perceptions of Job Roles and Responsibilities	Recommendation 2: Clearly Defined Instructor Job Roles and Responsibilities
Theme 3: Understanding Unique Needs of First-Generation Students	Recommendation 3: Enhanced Student Orientations for First-Generation Students
Theme 4: Inadequately Prepared First-Generation Students	Recommendation 4: Enhanced First Year/ Freshman Seminar Courses for First-Generation Students

### Recommendations for Future Research

One recommendation for future research is to expand the study to include instructors from both accredited and nonaccredited institutions. Coincidentally, all participants in this study were affiliated with an accredited institution; thus, the accrediting body regulates strict accountability measures. Research regarding accredited and nonaccredited medical assistant programs may compare retention in accredited versus nonaccredited programs and further practices reporting qualitative research in health professions (J. L. Johnson et al., 2020). The outcomes of this study solely relied on the descriptive perceptions from instructors, which provides an understanding of the problem from an instructor’s viewpoint.

A second recommendation is to consider a study addressing first-generation students’ perceptions. Perceptions of first-generation students in this matter would provide a more in-depth understanding of the factors affecting student–instructor engagement and developing a productive relationship. Thus, this type of study may provide a comparison between student and instructor descriptions and provide more evidence-based suggestions to improve student–instructor engagement and develop a

productive relationship. Additionally, examining first-generation students' perceptions using a research design to include data from observations and focus groups, perhaps in an exploratory case study, may further describe engagement, relationship, and retention hindrances (Yin, 2018).

Another recommendation is to use a different data collection instrument to analyze statistical data, perhaps in a quantitative survey. Through correlational inquiries, quantitative researchers focus on theories, hypotheses, and relationships between independent and dependent variables (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Analyzing statistical data may provide numerical insight into quantifying the number of impacted first-generation students in a medical assistant program (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Last, a larger sample size, including other health career programs, may generate different outcomes. Hence, this type of study may compare quantitative data between health career programs.

## Conclusion

A summation of the participants' descriptions emphasized the importance of engagement in developing student–instructor relationships with first-generation students. Study participants indicated many challenges in engaging with first-generation students in a medical assistant program. The noted challenges affected the quality and consistency of engagement and the ability to develop a student–instructor relationship. Furthermore, a lack of consistency between engagement in general education courses and practical medical assistant courses affected the quality of staff engagement.

The participants spoke to the need for stronger college readiness efforts from the high school level and stronger engagement efforts in general education courses to enhance student–instructor engagement. Additionally, discrepancies between job descriptions and leadership styles were apparent. Although employees undergo similar new faculty orientations and professional development, the results of this study demonstrated the need to increase student engagement expectations to develop student–instructor relationships, which influence program completion with first-generation students in a medical assistant program. Moreover, clearly defined job roles and responsibilities could improve upon and create standardized operations. Considering the research questions, findings, and recommendations to educational leaders, further quantitative research could highlight the importance of increased engagement and support for first-generation students in other health science programs.

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