

# First-Generation College Students: Navigating the Worlds of School and Home

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*First-generation students' transitions are particularly important to their success in college. Though attention to and support for first-generation students on college campuses have increased in recent decades, these efforts remain campus-centric, encouraging first-generation students to assimilate to the culture and values of post-secondary education. These efforts lack recognition of students' ties to their homes and families. A holistic recognition of and support for first-generation students' transitions and negotiations between the disparate worlds of home and school could further promote their success both inside and outside the classroom. This scholarly article asserts that practitioners and students will benefit from more purposefully recognizing the role that the world of home plays in first-generation students' transitions and experiences. The author presents a review of the literature, a discussion of the importance of first-generation students' connections to home, and recommendations for practice, specifically centered around first-generation student transitions.*

First-generation students, generally understood as those who are first in their families to go to college, have been an increasingly popular subject of inquiry and research in higher education for the past three decades. Beginning in the 1980s (Billson & Terry, 1982) and continuing into more recent years (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005), higher education scholars have documented the lagging retention rates, academic success, and graduation rates of first-generation students. The escalating focus is appropriate, as numbers of first-generation students have been increasing along with widened access to postsecondary education in recent decades; the number of first-generation students enrolling in two- and four-year colleges in the United States continues to rise. In 1995-96, first-generation students made up 47% of students entering higher education, up from 43% just six years earlier (Kojaku & Nunez, 1998). Davis (2010) asserts that the current first-generation population likely makes up the majority of postsecondary enrollment today. This is important because first-generation students face challenges that are distinct from students whose parents attended college. An increasing number of research studies and scholarly discussions address these unique and significant challenges.

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## First-Generation Student Literature: Focused on Impediments

The literature on first-generation student success, in which success is typically defined in terms of student retention, deals centrally with the impediments of first-generation students' academic achievement, social adjustments, and financial constraints (Billson & Terry, 1982; Choy, 2001; Hertel, 2002; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996), while a smaller subset of the literature addresses the "disjunction" between family and college realms (London, 1989; Orbe, 2004; Stieha, 2010). Nearly all forms of support provided by colleges and universities are focused on mediating challenges for first-generation students in three realms: academic, social, and financial. Many of these transition aids and support systems can be quite helpful. As numbers of first-generation students have increased, institutions have dedicated increasing amounts of resources to bolstering these programs.

## Overlooking the Importance of Home

With such a focus on academic, social, and financial support for first-generation students, universities have made an assumption that the path to first-generation student success is situated firmly in the campus environment. What colleges and universities seem to overlook is the importance of home in the experience of first-generation students. In fact, the very nature of first-generation students' distinction stems from the unfamiliarity of families and communities at home with the college environment and the tools that college students need to succeed. College campuses are designed for those who possess familiarity with postsecondary culture and values, which means that first-generation students face the lonely reality of being outsiders on campus, without the support of an understanding community. First-generation students' home communities may understand the background and history of these students, but are unable to provide support from home as their students navigate the landscape of postsecondary education, with its unique values, priorities, and practices. In addition, those at home may feel uncomfortable or even dejected as their students learn, grow, and change in unfamiliar ways within the college context. Even families who supported their students' goals of attending college may experience significant challenges as that student renegotiates relationships amidst changing contexts. This leaves the family "ill equipped to help [the student] make a successful transition to college" (Jehangir, 2010, p. 43), while the student is left to figure out how to exist on the fringes of both the home and college worlds.

This paper asserts that a more holistic recognition and support of first-generation students' connections to home could further promote their success, both inside and outside the classroom. I begin by describing the family context of first-generation college students and the reasons why home is often more salient for these students. I then assert that the connection of first-generation students to their families is beneficial for the success of those students. I conclude by offering implications for practice, specifically with respect to their transitions, that stem

from a holistic understanding of the importance of home for first-generation students.

## **First-Generation College Students: The Family Context**

Negotiating relationships and connections with parents and family is a transition that all college students encounter, but for first-generation students, this transition looks much different than their non-first-generation peers' experience. Because the parents of first-generation students did not go to college, it may be more difficult for these parents to provide important support for their students during the transition to college. Research with first-generation students (Bui, 2002; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007) recounts a lack of parents' understanding of the demands of college, such as necessary time spent studying. Ironically, first-generation students themselves may want more of the very involvement that their parents and families are ill-prepared to provide. In a study by the Higher Education Research Institute (2008), first-generation students were more likely to report that their parents had "too little" involvement in their lives, while most students said their parents' level of involvement was "just right."

First-generation students may not only desire more involvement and connection with parents, but they may, in fact, benefit from it. In her discussion of the debate on the role of family relationships in college student transitions, Winkle-Wagner (2009) notes several studies (Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Rice, Fitzgerald, Whaley, & Gibbs, 1995; Schneider & Ward, 2003; Soucy & Larose, 2000; Strage, 1998) that suggest that "strong parental attachment is associated with success in college and is particularly important in the academic and emotional adjustments made by students of color" (p. 4). This is important because a majority of first-generation students are students of color (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010).

### **Feelings of "Homelessness"**

In her own year-long study with 30 African American women, 24 of whom were first-generation students, Winkle-Wagner (2009) found that her participants felt caught between the pressures of assimilating into college culture and maintaining connections with family. The women in Winkle-Wagner's (2009) study described feeling "homeless" as they "grappled with immense expectations from their families or home communities to succeed in college. In part, these expectations stemmed from the fact that most of the women were first-generation students" (p. 21).

The feeling of "homelessness" is not unique to African American first-generation students. Bradbury and Mather's (2009) research with Caucasian first-generation students from Ohio Appalachia revealed that "strong connections with home played a critical role in student success...[but] maintaining connections with home required that participants juggle important yet sometimes conflicting roles" (p. 265). Likewise, Torres's (2004) study of Latino first-year students, of

which 80% were first-generation, found that students experienced conflict between family expectations and college culture, which values student involvement and engagement on campus. Torres (2004) reported that “almost all of the students stated that their parents were supportive of them being in college, yet the majority also expressed that their parents did not understand what it was like for them to be in college” (p. 463-464).

The issue of navigating home and school worlds, and the role that students play within each one, may be most salient for first-generation students with strong cultural identities that value family unity, but the challenge of navigating the disparate values and cultures of home and school is not unique to first-generation students from particular backgrounds. London’s (1989) study of first-generation student transitions included students of a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds and found that “family role assignments and separation dynamics [are] at the center of the drama of first-generation students” (p. 147). As first-generation students stretch from one world into the other, they “must also negotiate issues of marginality—on both ends—as they work to bridge the worlds of their homes/families/neighborhoods and college life” (Orbe, 2004, p. 133).

## **Theoretical Approaches**

Our lack of value for the importance of first-generation students’ ties to home may be due at least in part to traditional understandings of student engagement and retention. Dominant paradigms for understanding student success in college, such as Tinto’s (1993) Theory of Student Departure, implicitly and explicitly identify influences of family and home environments as liabilities that distract students from academic and social integration into college culture. This perspective may seem to make sense, since we can trace the distinction of first-generation students back to their parents and families, who embody the history and culture of not being college educated; however, when support programs for and research about first-generation students are guided by an understanding that student integration into college norms and culture will equal success, the result is a de facto home/school dichotomy, where student success is situated firmly in the school context, and home becomes an enemy to college achievement and persistence. When home and family are important parts of first-generation students’ lives, this dichotomy can be the source of significant and difficult tension between home and school.

## **Reconsidering Dominant Theory**

Despite the disproportionate scholarly focus on Tinto’s theory in higher education research and practice (Museus & Quaye, 2009; Guiffreda, 2006), there is a significant body of literature that questions and critiques Tinto’s assumptions—particularly the assumption that home and family are negative influences on students’ transitions to and integration into college life. These critical treatments

and revisions of Tinto's (1993) theory stem largely from cultural perspectives and draw attention to experiences of students from minority backgrounds (Braxton, Sullivan & Johnson, 1997; Guiffrida, 2006; Kuh & Love, 2000; Museus & Quaye, 2009; Rendón, Jalomo & Nora, 2000; Tierney, 1999). Many of these critical perspectives are applicable to the transitions of first-generation students and their cultural gap between home and school, due to differences from the majority college culture in terms of race, socioeconomic status, or motivations for pursuing a college degree (Bui, 2002; Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Stephens et al., 2012).

In particular, Stephens et al. (2012) suggest that the foundation of modern college culture is built on notions of independence, which serves as a disadvantage to first-generation students, who are more likely to operate from worldviews that value *interdependence* (e.g., maintained connections with family and community). Other scholars also assert that connections with communities of family and home are salient for first-generation students (Bartels, 1995; Brooks-Terry, 1988; London, 1989), and these ties complicate their transitions to college, particularly when college orientation and transition programs focus on students separating from their families to assimilate into the college environment.

## Internal Resources & Validation Theory

Some studies (McGregor et al., 1991; Phinney & Haas, 2003; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007) have found that first-generation students' internal resources, such as self-confidence and self-efficacy, are positively associated with transitioning to college and coping with stress in college. Thus, services and programs that focus on building these internal resources (e.g., professional or peer mentors or other purposeful encouragement from others) could be helpful in building first-generation students' beliefs in their capabilities. Rendón's (1994) validation theory, which was conceived as having particular application for low-income, first-generation students, also supports this idea. Rendón (1994) describes validation as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that fosters academic and interpersonal development" (p. 44). Since first-generation students' lack of self-efficacy may be due to their family's lack of experience with college environments (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007), purposefully providing validation for first-generation college students could be beneficial.

## Reciprocity: What can Educators Learn from First-Generation Students?

Validating and supporting the perspectives of first-generation college students should not be a transactional exercise toward the single end of student success. If we, as educators, truly value first-generation students, we must value first-generation experiences and perspectives by designing learning environments that

recognize these students' contexts, histories, and strengths. Pizzolato (2004), in her study of high-risk students—including first-generation students—found that these students may possess unique capacities for commitment to “possible selves,” which “compel students to act in ways that will either keep them from becoming the self they fear or keep them on the road toward becoming the self they desire” (p. 799). This level of commitment may be an internal resource that first-generation students develop as a result of overcoming the constraints to their entering college at all. Other students, faculty, staff, university programs, and curricula may benefit from learning more about how this and other strengths of first-generation students could positively impact post-secondary learning on a broad level.

## **Support that Recognizes the Family Context: Suggestions for Practice**

Typical campus resources for first-generation students focus on providing financial, academic, and social supports, which are certainly important elements of first-generation students' transitions to college. The focus on these elements in the literature on first-generation students suggests that both scholars and practitioners are increasingly attentive to these elements and working to provide support for first-generation students in these areas. This focus, however, obscures the disjunction that college causes between first-generation students and their families. Because first-generation students report feeling conflicting loyalties between college and their families (Billson & Terry, 1982; Hertel, 2002; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), their success does not depend wholly on their assimilation to the college environment, but also on effectively managing the transition of relationships at home; therefore, support systems that do not recognize the challenge of navigating the college and home environments provide only part of the support that first-generation students need.

## **Promoting Connection and Understanding Between Home and School**

In order to support first-generation students' important transitions with respect to their home and family communities, colleges and universities should consider additional services and programs that demonstrate a more holistic understanding of first-generation students' transitions. Though several studies (Billson & Terry, 1982; Bradbury & Mather, 2009; London, 1989; Stieha, 2010; Torres, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2009) acknowledge the challenges that first-generation students face in terms of balancing the demands of home and school, these students may not recognize or purposefully manage assistance in navigating this aspect of their college transition. In order to support first-generation students' own self-awareness of this aspect of their transition, universities could offer first-year experience courses for first-generation students that include recognition and

discussion of this challenge. Institutions could also include such discussions in first-generation students' encounters with residence hall staff, academic advisors, or counselors. First-generation students may gain comfort and validation from the recognition that others are experiencing similar challenges. Additionally, institutions could equip first-generation students, via first-year experience courses or group counseling, with skills on how to approach discussions with parents and families as they navigate this transition. Because students may not know how to approach these conversations, structures such as course assignments (e.g., in a first-year experience course for first-generation students) could facilitate this learning. Perhaps an assignment that prompted students to interview their parents or family would provide a valuable start to these conversations. Students might ask family members about their values and consider how these family values speak to their own personal values and to the values and practices of college. The class might identify and discuss tensions between the two and brainstorm strategies for approaching the tensions where they exist. Because first-generation students have struggled with the disjunction between the cultures of school and home (London, 1989; Orbe, 2004; Winkle-Wagner, 2009), promoting opportunities for connection and mutual understanding between these environments may help first-generation students feel less like strangers in both environments.

## Social Support from Home

There is evidence, both qualitative (Arellano & Padilla, 1996) and quantitative (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Solberg, Valdez, & Villarreal, 1994; Solberg & Villarreal, 1997), that social support, including support from parents, is related specifically to adjustment in college for ethnic minority college students (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005). Thus, celebrating with and communicating to first-generation students' families about their students' successes may also help first-generation students by teaching their families about college culture and providing encouragement for both students and their families. A list-serve for parents and families of first-generation students would be a very suitable medium to facilitate this social support from home and could be a collaborative effort from an orientation or first-year-experience office and the Parents' Office or Dean's Office. Colleges could also serve their first-generation students by communicating the value of validation to the parents and families of these students. Doing so may help family members better understand how to support their students and could also help build internal resources (e.g., self-efficacy, self-confidence), which may contribute to student persistence and success, particularly for first-generation students.

## Future research

First-generation students would also benefit from additional research regarding the experience and challenge of navigating the worlds of home and school. Most

literature concerning first-generation students, and consequently most institutional practice, centers on financial, academic, and social challenges; additional studies that recognize the influence of first-generation students' families will enable practitioners to serve first-generation students more holistically.

As Terenzini et al. (1996) assert, first-generation students "come less well prepared and with more nonacademic demands on them, and they enter a world where they are less likely to experience many of the conditions that other research indicates are positively related to persistence, performance, and learning" (p. 18); therefore, colleges and universities must recognize that traditional models of retention and student success may not be sufficient for first-generation students. As researchers and practitioners, we must reach beyond the bounds of college-based academic, financial, and social support of traditional student success models (e.g., Astin, 1984; Tinto, 1993). If we are to support the *whole* first-generation student, we must address the difficult balance of home and school that these students experience.

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