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# Assessing the Effects of Parental Involvement on First-Generation and Second-Generation College Students

Terence Hicks

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Few researchers have studied the effects that parental influence has on first-generation and second-generation college students. This lack of empirical knowledge prompted this investigation on the effectiveness of parental involvement on first- and second-generation college student performance.

A recent review of literature reveals that researchers have used different definitions of the "first-generation" concept (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Billson & Terry, 1982). Bean and Metzner (1985) examined the research on the correlation between parental education and the first-generation college student's persistence and reported that other researchers found equivocal results when examining this relationship. Billson and Terry (1987) argued, however, that the analysis performed by Bean and Metzner (1985) was confounded by their definition of nontraditional students (part-time or older than 24 years of age or commuter) and by their assumption that first-generation college students are commuters from blue-collar families. Billson and Terry (1982) defined first-generation college students as those whose parents have had no college or university experience. This study defines first-generation college students similarly.

Their study indicated that a tendency for parents of second-generation college students to provide a wider range of support. First-generation college students perceived their parents to be emotionally, but not financially or academically, supportive. In contrast, second-generation college students perceived their parents to be emotionally, academically and financially supportive, and willing to assist with such tasks as homework and transportation.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Most of the studies examining the influence of parental support on student success have focused on preschool children. A few studies, however, have examined this variable in college student populations. A number of researchers have examined various relationships between college students' educational experiences and the educational level of their parents. These studies have primarily examined the correlation between retention and attrition rates of college students and the educational and occupational levels of the parents as determined by their socioeconomic status (Webb, 1973).

Other studies have focused on the relationship between student persistence (Pantages & Creedon, 1978) and parental education levels (Rockwell, 1972). The results of these studies have been mixed. Although some researchers have found evidence of a strong relationship between parental level of education and students' success (Rockwell, 1972), others have not (Webb, 1973). Whereas the aforementioned researchers examined parental influence on the success of college students, none directly assessed differences between first-generation and second-generation college students.

Because first-generation college students may be perceived as having different expectations, poorer academic and social preparation, greater financial constraints, lower self-esteem, and insufficient parental support, it would seem logical to suggest that they do not perform as well as second-generation college students. The increased accessibility of higher education to minorities necessitates a clearer understanding of this causal relationship because their participation as first-generation students in the college and university process has dramatically grown. Additionally, because basic information about college survival and success may not be readily available from first-generation families, there is a need for more extensive research to determine the nature and type of academic support systems needed for this population's college success. In this study, I attempt to assess the effectiveness of parental involvement on first-generation and second-generation college students and provide the educational setting with an academic support system for retaining first-generation college students.

### *Method*

An exploratory study examined two groups of college students, one comprised of first-generation students and the other second-

generation students. Since the groups in this study were predetermined by virtue of parents' college attendance status, special care was taken not to generalize the findings of this study to other student populations. The findings may hold true only if the populations are similar in nature.

### Participants

The participants for this study were enrolled in two different Introductory Psychology courses and one Intercultural Communication course at an urban college setting located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Table A shows that first-generation and second-generation college students did not differ significantly on the average age (first-generation students  $M=25$  and second-generation  $M=24$ ). The majority of the first-generation and second-generation college students were African American (first-generation 77% and second-generation 66%).

Only 4% of first-generation and 11% of second-generation Caucasians students were represented in this study. Eighty-four percent of the first-generation college students were female, and 92% of second-generation students were female. The majority of first-generation and second-generation college students surveyed were residents of Pennsylvania (first-generation 93% and second-generation 83%).

#### Demographic

Table A

Variable of Comparison	First-Generation	Second-Generation
Age	$M = 25$	$M = 24$
African Americans	77%	66%
Caucasians	4%	11%
Gender (female)	84%	92%
Residents of Pa.	93%	83%

Note: First-generation college students,  $N=43$ ;  
second-generation college students,  $N=12$

### Procedures

The researcher administered the study to two different Psychology 101 classes and to an Intercultural Communication course. Even though one course met twice a week and the other two courses met once a week, the actual instructional hours were of equal duration. All students present on the day of testing voluntarily participated.

### Instrument

A 32-item, author-generated questionnaire was used. The majority of the questions on the instrument were derived from instruments used in previously published, post-secondary education

situations (Stage & Hossler, 1989; Ford, 1991). The remainder of the questionnaire was developed by the author to supplement and/or clarify the information requested by previously stated questions. A pilot study was conducted to determine whether problems existed with students' understanding of the questions as well as to determine the amount of time it took to complete the questionnaire.

The first section of the questionnaire collected demographic information, such as name, gender, ethnicity/race, Pennsylvania residency, and identity as first-generation or second-generation college student. The second section assessed the students' and parents' educational expectations. These questions concerned students' perceptions of parental expectations, for example,

- How often do you think about future plans after college?
- That is the highest level of education parents expect you to complete.

Also student financial preparedness was addressed with questions asking about the

- That is the amount of financial assistance needed for the student to attend a post secondary institution.
- Can you provide financially for your own education?

College information received and read was assessed with questions such as as

- At what point in time did you start receiving information about post secondary institution?

The third section consisted of items using a four-point Likert-type scale that ranged from one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree). All ten items were scored in the same direction. Therefore, the higher the number, the higher the level of agreement with the items or statements. The scale addressed the issue of parental involvement supporting education with statements such as:

- My parents value education and achievement.
- My parents believe that going to school is important.
- My parents support my decisions about attending a local college or university.
- My parents felt that receiving good grades was important.
- My parents felt that I could grow up to be anything I wanted to be.

The fourth and last section provided students with a five-item Likert-type scale that ranged from one (strongly disagree) to four (strongly agree). All five items were scored in the same direction. Therefore, the higher the number, the higher the level of agreement with the statements. The scale addressed the students' attitudes toward school and their perceptions of their learning environment. Items included!

- Students have power and make decisions in school.

- Teachers listen to the ideas of students.
- Students feel important at my school.
- Instructors at my school like working with all students.
- My instructors treat me with respect, and I feel important in my classes.

**Discussion**

Although Billson and Terry's study (1982) has indicated that second-generation college students have a great advantage when it comes to parental involvement, this study indicates that some conclusions should be reexamined. Nevertheless, Billson and Terry's results showing that parents of second-generation students tend to provide a wider range of support is confirmed by this study that found that parents who have experienced the college educational process are in a much better position to pass information about their experiences on to their children, whereas parents of first-generation college students simply do not have similarly supportive information to share.

In contrast to Billson and Terry's findings, a statistically significant favorable difference was found in the perceived parental family support for first-generation college students who attended an inner city college in Philadelphia. Table B provides a sum-

mary of this researcher's current findings. The researcher's data indicate that first-generation college students perceived more support from their families for attending college than did second-generation college students. Possible implications of this study's findings are the following:

(a) though parents of these first-generation college students did not attend a college or university, they showed more parental support for their child/ children to attend successfully and graduate from a college or university.

(b) recognizing the lack of academic support that parents of first-generation college students may not have to give to their child/ children, these parents have begun to seek additional educational paths and resources to help guide their child/children with college-related activities.

Several items in the parental involvement section of the questionnaire addressed the students' perceptions of how much their parents were involved in making decisions about attending college. The participants were asked to consider their perceived parental involvement in ten areas and indicate whether or not the item applies to their circumstances. A summary of first-generation and second-generation college students' responses to the ten items is presented in Table B.

**Table B**

*Parental Involvement: First-generation college students compared to Second-generation college students*

Parental Involvement	First-generation college students		Second-generation college students	
	agreed	disagreed	agreed	disagreed
My parents felt that one of the best ways to become successful in life is to do well in school; If I do well in school, I can get the kind of job that I want.	95%	5%	75%	25%
My parents felt that I could grow up to be anything I want to be.	95%	5%	75%	25%
My parents felt that I could achieve good grades in school when I work hard.	100%	0%	92%	8%
My parents felt that receiving good grades was important.	100%	0%	84%	16%
My parents felt that attending college right after completing high school was first priority.	79%	21%	67%	33%
My parents told me that if I want to be successful in life, I must work hard in school.	98%	2%	84%	16%
My parents value education and achievement.	100%	0%	84%	16%
When I needed help with school work, my parents tried to help me.	79%	21%	75%	25%
My parents believe that going to school is important.	98%	2%	92%	8%
My parents support my decisions about attending a local college or university.	89%	11%	84%	16%

As this **Table B** shows, generally a larger percentage of first-generation than second-generation college students responded that their parents felt that one of the best ways to become successful in life is to do well in school; they felt that if they did well in school, then they could get the kind of job that they wanted (95% compared to 75% respectively); also a higher percentage of first-generation students believed that their parents felt that they could grow up to be anything that they wanted to be (95% compared to 75% respectively). Table B also shows that 100% of first-generation as opposed to 92% of second-generation college students believed that their parents felt that they could achieve good grades in school when they worked hard.

Another interesting finding in Table B shows that 100% of first-generation as opposed to 84% of second-generation college students believed that their parents felt that receiving good grades was important. Seventy-nine percent of first-generation as opposed to 67% of second-generation college students believed that their parents felt that attending college right after completing high school was first priority. Also 98% of first-generation as opposed to eighty-four percent of second-generation college students believed that their parents felt they must work hard in school if they wanted to be successful. One-hundred percent of first-generation as opposed to 84% of second-generation college students believed that their parents valued education and achievement. Seventy-nine percent of first-generation as opposed to 75% of second-generation college students felt that their parents tried to help them with their school work. Both first-generation and second-generation college students felt that their parents believed that going to school was important (98% compared to 92%, respectively); both generations felt that their parents supported their decision about attending a local college or university (89% compared to 84%, respectively).

### Conclusion

Table B findings indicate that because the first-generation college student's parent/parents didn't have the opportunity to attend a college or university, there seems to be more parental involvement and support for their child/children to attend a college and to do well. These parents may be acting on the belief that the absence of parental involvement could eliminate opportunities for the enhancement of the child/children's education and that the presence of parental involvement could create many opportunities for students.

In terms of actual performance, previous studies have shown that first-generation college students may not fit the model of ideal students as well-prepared, having earned good grades in high school, having the self-esteem and self-efficacy to succeed, and having enough familial and financial support to dedicate themselves full-time to becoming a well-rounded graduate. On the

other hand, this study indicates that many first-generation college students do have parental backing, but lack of experience and other types of resources may restrict their range of support. As a result, the community college may be the ideal place for first-generation college students to expand their supportive base.

In many ways, community colleges are best able to attract these first-generation students because of their ability to meet the needs of a diverse student population (Cross, 1990). Cross indicated that open-admissions policies, comparatively low tuition costs, and more convenient location of campuses are central advantages of community colleges. These advantages, reinforced by parental support, may be critical factors in supporting a first-generation college student's success. However, universities and colleges, in general, can take steps to expand the first-generation college student's opportunities and base of support.

College students (first-generation or second-generation) who perceive positive family support in their college experiences are likely to possess more information about college and to be more successful in college than those students who do not perceive positive family support.

As a preventive measure, college professionals should implement intensive counseling support groups and orientation programs aimed directly at those college students who receive less parental and academic support. In addition, colleges and universities should also implement programs that would involve the parents of first-generation college students. After these students are interviewed and accepted to the college or university, the school could provide an orientation/reception program designed for parents to familiarize them with the academic support systems offered by the college or university. This approach to increasing retention recognizes the family system as a key component and views the parents as integral partners in their child/children's success.

An effective tool for combating possible lack of parental and academic support for first-generation college students is through the freshman-year experience course. This course would teach first-generation college students what a university has to offer and familiarize them with faculty expectations. In addition, the curriculum of this course should include topics that may benefit the first-generation college student, such as understanding the goals of the college or university, planning a career and choosing a major, making ethical decisions, and learning time management skills to support academic success.

Suggestions for providing additional support to first-generation colleges students who may lack the academic, personal, social and parental support include freshman interest groups, residence living groups, and seminar memberships that would continue to the student's sophomore semester; activities of a community-

building type that last through the sophomore year; strong tutorial and supplemental instruction, along with integrated study groups, through course and instructor planning; extracurricular activities that bond students, faculty, staff, and the institution. Collaborative efforts involving student and academic affairs through academic support systems and course curriculum development can provide a strong retention system to meet the academic, personal, and social needs of a first-generation college student. Additionally, a first-year college student program that views the family as a partner in increasing the likelihood of retention will be most successful.

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