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Differences in Retention-Related Risk Factors and Potential Resources across First-Generation and Non-First-Generation College Students

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DIFFERENCES IN RETENTION-RELATED RISK FACTORS AND POTENTIAL
RESOURCES ACROSS FIRST-GENERATION AND NON-FIRST-GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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By

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Abstract

This study was completed to examine the differences in experience of first-generation and non-first-generation college students both before and during college. The purpose focused on retention-related risk factors as well as potential resources. The study was conducted through an online survey system called Qualtrics. There were 246 participants from the psychology department of the University of Nebraska- Lincoln, and participants received research credits for completing the survey. The study included measures for stress, depression symptoms, anxiety, perceived support as well as questions regarding academic practices and biographical information. The results of the study were analyzed using SPSS software, and they indicated that high-achieving first-generation and non-first-generation students do not significantly differ across many academic practices during college; however, implications do exist for first-generation college students in preparation for college as well as their attainment of social and cultural capital upon arriving on a college campus.

Key Words: First-generation, non-first-generation, college students, cultural capital, high-achieving

Dedication

I would like to thank Dr. Trey Andrews for his time and support throughout the duration of this project. Learning about research has been incredibly influential for me, and it has provided the confidence needed to pursue research in my future studies and work. Additionally, his patience and encouragement at each step of the process have made the completion of this thesis possible. Finally, I would like to thank the UCARE program of the University of Nebraska- Lincoln for providing funding for students to get involved with research. I would have never imagined myself participating in such a project a few years ago, but UCARE made it possible for me to dive into a new experience with support and excitement.

Differences in Retention-Related Risk Factors and Potential Resources Across First-Generation and Non-First-Generation College Students

For each student, there is a different reason or purpose for pursuing a college degree, and for first-generation students, these aspirations are frequently cut short. First-generation students, or students whose parents received only a high school diploma or less, receive lower GPAs (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Inman & Mayes, 1999), graduate college less often (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Ishitani, 2006), and possess lower levels of the cultural and social capitals necessary to successfully navigate the college environment as compared to peers whose parents attended college (Engle, 2007, pg. 26; Hottinger & Rose, 2006, p. 116; Ishitani, 2006; Dumais & Ward, 2009). These disparities, greatly influenced by the preparation and support received from parents, have contributed to major gaps in educational experiences and, ultimately, post-graduate success (Engle, 2007). The current study focused on the experiences of college students to best understand which campus resources and support systems are most beneficial for the retention of first-generation college students.

Before setting foot on a college campus, first-generation students may already be at a disadvantage. In a study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Hottinger and Rose (2006) found that first-generation college students received lower SAT scores compared with non-first-generation students (SAT averages were 858 compared to 1011, respectively). Additionally, first-generation students often had lower high school GPAs than their counterparts whose parents attended college (GPAs averaging 2.6 compared to 2.9, respectively). With the SAT and GPA being important for the college application process, disparities arise in the college entrance rates and prestige of universities attended by first-generation and non-first-generation college students (Engle, 2007; Inman & Mayes, 1999).

Once admitted into college, weaker preparations in high school for first-generation students are reflected in their academic decisions. In a study of 7,400 12-graders in the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, Chen (2005) found that first-generation students are more likely to take remedial courses their first semester of college than non-first-generation students (55% compared with 27%). Additionally, first-generation students experience greater difficulty in selecting a major in college (33% without a major compared with 13% for non-first-generation students), and they often earn less credit hours in their first year of college (18 credit hours compared with 25, respectively). These disadvantages experienced by first-generation students in the first year of college will likely increase the length of time and perhaps costs necessary to attain a college degree.

There are a variety of other characteristics common of first-generation students. In the same NCES study mentioned previously, Hottinger and Rose (2006) found that 39% of first-generation students chose to live off campus, 49.9% chose a school within 50 miles of their home to remain close to family members, and 22.7% had major concerns about affording their collegiate education. Additionally, first-generation college students were more likely to be older, from low-income households, Black or Hispanic, a part-time student, a full-time employee, and married with dependents as compared to students whose parents have attended college (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Engle, 2007). These attributes greatly limit the time and resources first-generation students are able to dedicate to academics and other collegiate pursuits (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Engle, 2007). Rather than joining student organizations, attending office hours, or meeting new students at campus events, first-generation students must often spend time learning how to study at a collegiate level, working to afford college, or perhaps resolving familial conflict associated with being the first member to leave home and attend college (Engle, 2007).

Because the majority of college students have parents who attended college, the dominant culture on college campuses is likely college literate, or familiar with the procedures and skills necessary to be successful in college (Hottinger & Rose, 2006). In turn, cultural capital, or the understanding of the dominant culture in a specified setting, may help explain the disparities between first-generation and non-first-generation students, especially in terms of college preparation (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Dumais & Ward, 2009). For example, Engle (2007) describes that non-first-generation students have an advantage because their parents, who have experienced many of the collegiate processes previously, can better prepare and guide their students through their experiences in applying and attending college. This advantage also translates into higher levels of social capital, or proficiency in relationships, for non-first-generation students. As a result of parental influence, non-first-generation students are often better prepared to develop social connections that they may leverage to better succeed in college, such as joining campus organizations, meeting new people, accessing campus resources, and asking for help from faculty, staff, or peers (Engle, 2007).

Cultural and social capital may have large consequences including attrition and degree completion (Dumais & Ward, 2009). According to a study completed by Inmann and Mayes (1999), 10% of first-generation students dropped out after the first semester, emphasizing the importance of the first few months of college. This pattern, certainly not unique to any one institution, is a national concern which has been acted upon through federally funded TRIO Programs, which provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, have become prominent at universities across the country (Engle, 2007). Student Support Services, a federally funded program for students who are low-income, first generation, or have a documented disability, currently serves students at more than 700 institutions and various structural elements,

such as learning community membership or academic peer groups, have been implemented to create a more successful first-year experience (Thayer, 2000).

In addition to TRIO programming, other studies have identified key factors that increase the success and experience of first-generation students in the first semester of college. First, retention rates increase when students have routine interactions with faculty, staff, and other students who promote their continued academic efforts (Hottinger & Rose, 2006). Interactions such as academic advising, tutoring, office hours, or study groups, help first-generation students find a greater sense of success and belonging on campus (Engle, 2007). Second, college programs and curriculum must be clearly explained and understood, especially for students who change majors throughout their college career (Hottinger & Rose, 2006). Next, support services greatly increase a student's chances of success, and it is important that they are easily accessible and known by students (Hottinger & Rose, 2006). Finally, retention is best at institutions that encourage and support academic-related behaviors so that students can develop and apply skills that are useful on and off campus (Hottinger & Rose, 2006).

For the reasons stated above, many universities and college institutions have placed great value in the creation and implementation of learning communities. According to Vincent Tinto of Syracuse University, learning communities begin with shared classes which connect first-year students within similar majors, interests, or career paths (Tinto, 1999). Generally, effective learning communities also include shared responsibilities within the community, structured curriculum applied to a chosen focus, and collaborative faculty members to guide the programming (Tinto, 1999). Students who are part of a learning community have been known to create strong self-supporting groups within their learning communities, become more

academically and socially engaged, and ultimately, persist at a higher rate than students that are not in learning communities (Tinto, 1999).

From an economic standpoint, men and women with college degrees make more money and have greater job opportunities than others with only a high school diploma (Hottinger & Rose, 2006). Additionally, college graduates are more likely to have meaningful work, be satisfied in their careers, be happier, have higher self-esteem, be healthier, be better investors, have higher verbal and quantitative skills, be more tolerant of others, be more politically active, and be more likely to be active within their communities (Hottinger & Rose, 2006). With this in mind, continued improvements and support for first-generation students contribute to the creation of a more engaged society.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify retention-related risk factors and potential resources for first-generation students as compared to non-first-generation students. The study contributed to the literature on first-generation college students by focusing on 1) at-home and on-campus stressors, 2) perceived support systems and sense of self, and 3) the utilization of campus resources. The analyses of this study can be used to identify ongoing challenges for first-generation students and opportunities for program development to increase retention rates and create a more successful experience for first-generation students.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 246 undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and received course credit as compensation for their participation. Of the participants, 89 (36.2%) were freshmen, 58 (23.6%) were sophomores, 40 (16.3%) were juniors, 54 (22%) were seniors,

and 5 (2%) were fifth-year or students or more. Most participants were women ($n = 196$, 79.7%); however, 46 (18.7%) participants identified as male, 1 (0.4%) transgender male, and 3 (1.2%) identified as non-binary. In regards to race/ethnicity, 198 (79.20%) of the participants identified as White, 9 (3.6%) as Black/African American, 11 (4.40%) as Hispanic/Latino, 1 (0.4%) as Native American/Alaska Native, 29 (11.60%) as Asian/Asian American, and 2 (0.8%) as other.

A minority (15.04%) of participants reported that their parents have not attended college, and the remaining participants have had at least one parent attend college. Within the group, 57.38% reported that their parents did not graduate college. For the purpose of this study, first-generation students will be considered as any participant whose parents did not graduate college.

Measures

Campus social integration and support. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet et al., 1988), a 12-item questionnaire with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Very Strongly Disagree)* to 7 (*Very Strongly Agree)*, was included to ask students about the people and support systems available to them, including family, friends, and significant others. The MSPSS has proven to be psychometrically sound in diverse samples and to have good internal reliability, test-retest reliability, and factorial validity (i.e., $\alpha = 0.81$ to 0.98 in non-clinical samples and 0.92 to 0.94 in clinical samples; Wongpakaran et al., 2011).

Mental health. To assess mental health symptoms, we included the Patient Health Questionnaire, a 9-item questionnaire measuring depression (PHQ-9; Spitzer et al., 1999). We also included the GAD-7, a seven-item measure of symptoms of Generalized Anxiety Disorder (Spitzer et al., 2006). Both the GAD-7 and the PHQ-9 use the same format and ask participants how often they have been bothered by various problems over the last two weeks. Participants respond using a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 3 (*Nearly every day*).

Both the GAD-7 (Lowe et al., 2008) and the PHQ-9 (Spitzer et al., 2001) have been found to have good internal consistency (i.e., α = 0.89).

      Stressors. To identify sources of stress and the ways in which participants respond to stress, we incorporated the Perceived Stress Scale and the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire. The Perceived Stress Scale includes 10 questions in which participants respond using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*Never)* to 4 (*Very Often)*. The PSS-10 has been evaluated to have a minimum measure of internal consistency (i.e., α > 0.70; Lee, 2012). The Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (USQ; Crandall et al., 1992) is an 82-item questionnaire, and participants are asked to check all stressors from a list that have affected them in the past semester of college. The USQ has been found to have good internal reliability (i.e., α = 0.86; Akgun & Ciarrochi, 2003).

      Demographics and academic achievement. We asked questions regarding their age, gender, race/ethnicity, grades, parents' and family members' education levels, and high school coursework. Additionally, we included a questionnaire related to their academic performance, use of university resources, and history with any available learning communities.

Procedures

      The study was administered online using Qualtrics, an online research platform, after receiving research approval from the IRB board at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Participants of the study were able to complete the questionnaires on a device of their choosing, and there were no specifications for the location or amount of time required to complete the questionnaire. Students were free to exit the survey at any time and those that reached the end of the study received two research credits for their participation.

Data Analysis

Due to recruitment limitations, the participants of the study were largely found to be high-achieving students, having GPAs higher than 3.0, regardless of the educational status of their parents, which did not produce the anticipated risks associated with first-generation students. As a result, the focus of the data analysis was altered to closely examine hypotheses related to a high-achieving student population. Tests were conducted to focus more on differences in compensatory strategies utilized by first-generation students in comparison to their non-first-generation peers.

The items included in this study were selected on the basis of being stressors most often cited as influencing the experience of a first-generation student. The order of the questionnaires went as follows: PHQ-9, CASQ, Perceived Stress Scale, Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire, BIS/BAS Scales, Brief COPE, MSPSS, PSSM, GAD-7, Academic Services and Background, Demographics, and Perceived Racism Scale, if applicable. The data analysis was completed using independent samples t tests, chi-square tests of independence, and linear regression tests with the IBM SPSS Statistics software.

First, to examine to examine differences in at-home and on-campus stressors for first-generation and non-first-generation students, a series of *t* tests was completed to better understand college preparatory strategies utilized by first-generation and non-first-generation students, such as attending campus visits and earning college credits in high school, as well as high school and college GPAs. Additionally, a series of *t* tests were completed to measure experiences with stress, depression, and anxiety.

Next, to examine social support systems, a series of *t* tests were completed to gauge levels of perceived support from family members, friends, and significant others. Information

from the previous *t* tests regarding mental well-being were also used to examine stress related to relationships.

Finally, a series of t tests and chi square tests were completed to better understand the academic practices and involvements of first-generation and non-first-generation students. The groups were compared across their frequency of meeting with an academic advisor, attending academic workshops, missing class for unexcused absences, going to professor's office hours, turning in incomplete or no assignments, and time spent preparing for an exam. Participants were also asked about their involvement in learning communities and perceived connections as a result of such membership.

Results

Similarities amongst First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students

Across many measures, first-generation and non-first-generation students were found to exhibit similarities in behavior and academic practices. Collegiate GPAs, t (229) = 1.20, p = 0.251, and the propensity to earn college credits in high school, χ^2 (1) = 0.30, p = 0.59, were not found to be significantly different between first-generation and non-first-generation students. In examining perceived support systems, there were also no significant differences between the groups for support from family, t (231) = 0.88, p = 0.382, friends, t (231) = 0.89, p = 0.372, and significant others t (231) = -0.51, p =0.612. Stress and anxiety, often thought to be higher for first-generation students, did not significantly differ in their reported depressive symptoms on the PHQ-9, t (231) = -1.18, p = 0.241, or anxiety on the GAD-7, t (231) = -1.17, p = 0.244. In examining stress, the Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire, t (231) = 0.32, p = 0.750, and the Perceived Stress Scale, t (231) = 0.14, p = 0.889, also produced insignificant results.

Academic practices and involvements during college are similar between participant groups as well. First-generation and non-first-generation students did not significantly differ in their likelihood of participating in a learning community, χ^2 (1) = 0.09, p = 0.76. Additionally, behaviors such as meeting with an academic advisor, t (230) = -0.38, p = 0.704, missing class, t (231) = 0.59, p = 0.559, visiting a professor during office hours, t (108.10) = -1.06, p = 0.291, completing assignments, t (231) = -0.54, p = 0.589, and preparing for an exam, t (231) = 0.42, p = 0.675, were not significantly different between first-generation and non-first-generation students and do not produce significant results.

Differences in Academic Preparedness and Engagement

The study found that non-first-generation students are more likely to have a parent accompany them on a campus visit, χ^2 (1) = 7.10, p = 0.010. Additionally, it was found that first-generation students are more likely to attend academic workshops on campus, t (231) = -2.65, p = 0.010.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to analyze retention-related risk factors and potential campus resources available to first-generation students in comparison to their non-first-generation counterparts. Surprisingly, first-generation and non-first-generation students did not differ in their academic outcomes, which does not comport with prior literature indicating that first-generation college students often have poorer academic outcomes compared with non-first-generation students (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Inman & Mayes, 1999). This lack of difference may have resulted from recruiting biases in which primarily high-achieving participants were from both backgrounds participated in the study. In response, the study shifted focus to differences in behaviors across high-achieving first-generation and non-first-generation students.

Across many factors, these groups were similar. As high-achieving students, both groups may have well-developed practices for handling stress and anxiety associated with academic assignments and tasks, which has been indicated by non-significant results for the PHQ-9, GAD-7, USQ, and PSS measures. Additionally, in contrast to beginning research, there were no significant differences in academic practices between groups despite potential differences in levels of cultural and social capital (Engle, 2007; Hottinger & Rose, 2006). Non-first-generation students are often thought to be better prepared for navigating campus and seeking out resources, but this was not the case for the study (Engle, 2007).

It was also surprising to find that there were no significant findings for students who have participated in learning communities, which have been shown previously to help students better engage with course material as well as develop strong relationships with peers and faculty (Tinto, 1999). The study could benefit from learning more about the experience of learning community students and attracting participants from such groups. Further information regarding the application process for learning communities as well as how they are promoted to incoming students before entering college could also be helpful. First-generation students might be tracked into learning communities more frequently with increased awareness of such programs.

There were two significant differences that might be attributed to a gap in college literacy. First, parents of first-generation students were less likely to attend campus visits with their students. Perhaps, it is not clear that parents commonly accompany their students at such events or are at least welcome to do so. Additionally, it may be intimidating or overwhelming for first-generation parents to participate in a campus tour, not knowing which questions to ask or how to interpret the information they receive. Despite this difference, the presence of parents on

campus visits did not correlate with perceived familial support for either first-generation or non-first-generation students.

The second significant finding is related to the utilization of campus resources. It was found that first-generation students are more likely to attend academic workshops than non-first-generation students. As learned in prior research, first-generation students are likely to have lower levels of cultural capital in regards to the collegiate experience because their parents may not be able to explain the academic expectations and skills required for success (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Dumais & Ward, 2009); therefore, workshops may be utilized to learn about such topics.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. Most significantly, the shortened period of time allotted for data collection potentially attracted responses from high-achieving students and excluded responses from students that are more apt to wait until later in the semester to participate in research studies. An extended period of data collection, perhaps throughout an entire semester or academic year, could provide greater variety in academic-related practices, GPA, and perhaps involvements on campus. With this in mind, the current results of the study might be skewed toward habits of naturally high-achieving students, regardless of the educational status of their parents.

A second limitation of this study is that it was purely correlational. Observations or experiments were not completed to further analyze the behaviors or practices outlined in the hypothesis. All data received from the study was self-reported, and other sources were not contacted for verification in answers such as class attendance, hours spent studying, and frequency of attending professor's office hours.

Conclusion

Discrepancies exist between first-generation and non-first-generation students in both their preparation for college and their experiences on campus as has been outlined in our research and data analysis. Although many measures did not prove to be significant within the current study, the findings begin to identify areas of interest, such as campus visits and academic workshops. There is still much to learn about the retention-related resources and potential resources that best contribute to academic success, and further exploration will help academic institutions better serve their students by addressing at-home and on-campus stressors, enhancing support systems, and providing resources for both first-generation and non-first-generation students.

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Table 1.
Participant Demographic Information

	N	SD
Gender		
Male	46	18.7%
Female	196	79.67%
Transgender Male	1	0.4%
Non-Binary	3	1.2%
Year in School		
Freshman	89	36.2%
Sophomore	58	23.6%
Junior	40	16.3%
Senior	54	22%
Fifth Year or More	5	2%
Race/Ethnicity		
White	198	79.2%
Black/African American	9	3.6%
Hispanic/Latino	11	0.4%
Native American/Alaskan Native	29	11.6%
Asian/Asian American	2	0.8%

Table 2.
Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Social Support

	Parents did graduate college		Parents did not graduate college		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Friend	5.65	1.44	5.46	1.42	ns
Family	5.69	1.51	5.50	1.45	ns
Significant Other	5.55	1.60	5.67	1.42	ns

Note. M=Mean. *SD*=Standard Deviation. The Multidimensional Scales of Perceived Social Support range from 1 (*Very Strongly Disagree)* to 7 (*Very Strongly Agree*).

Table 3.

Stress and Anxiety

	Parents did graduate college		Parents did not graduate college		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*-test
Undergraduate Stress Questionnaire (USQ)	20.06	11.77	19.49	12.28	ns
Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)	18.77	4.49	18.68	5.03	ns
Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9)	14.14	5.20	15.08	5.62	ns
Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7)	13.63	5.24	14.59	6.20	ns

Table 4.
Academic Practices Among High-Achieving First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students

	Parents did graduate college		Parents did not graduate college		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t* test
Meet with academic advisor	2.32	0.68	2.36	0.61	ns
Attend academic workshops	1.56	0.93	2.05	1.31	0.01
Miss class for unexcused absences	2.15	0.94	2.07	0.89	ns
Attend professor's office hours	1.84	0.81	1.97	0.74	ns
Turn in incomplete or absent assignments	1.25	0.50	1.29	0.53	ns
Hours spent studying for a test	3.06	0.75	3.02	0.66	ns

Note. M=Mean. *SD*=Standard Deviation.

Table 5.
College Preparation

	Parents did graduate college		Parents did not graduate college		
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	χ^2
Earned college credits in high school	113	64.9%	36	61.0%	ns
Attended campus visit before enrolling	144	82.8%	51	86.4%	ns
Parents attended campus visit with student	146	83.9%	40	67.8%	0.014

Note. N=Number.

Table 6.
Learning community involvement during college

	Parents did graduate college		Parents did not graduate college		
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	X^2
Has participated with a learning community	38	21.8%	14	23.7%	ns
Currently involved with a learning community	17	9.8%	9	15.3%	ns

Note. N=Number.

Table 7.
GPA

	Parents did graduate college		Parents did not graduate college		
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t* test
High School GPA	4.17	4.99	3.61	0.63	ns
College GPA	3.43	0.51	3.35	0.47	ns

Note. M=Mean. *SD*=Standard Deviation.