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Supporting First Generation College Students

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Cover Page Footnote

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Supporting First Generation College Students **Kelli Hutchens, Matthew Deffendall, and Michael Peabody**

Seeking to help support first generation college students (FGCS), the University of Kentucky (UK) has developed new programming and initiatives in recent years aimed at enhancing institutional support for this student group. Among these efforts was the launch in 2009 of the First Scholars program at UK, a project funded by and affiliated with the Suder Foundation, which currently funds five First Scholars programs at universities around the country. This practitioner's brief first provides an overview of relevant literature related to serving FGCS and then discusses programmatic efforts undertaken at UK designed to improve the retention and graduation rates of FGCS.

Background on First Generation College Students

Defining First Generation for Campus Programming, Policies, and Data Collection

In designing programming and policies related to FGCS, an initial step involves an institutional determination of what it means to be a FGCS. Some classifications used by groups or researchers refer to first generation students as those students whose parents have at most a high school education and no additional educational experience. Other definitions classify FGCS as those students who may have had one or both parents obtain some education after high school but without attaining a degree. Federal law defines first generation status as: "an individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree" (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). At UK, first generation status is defined as having had neither parent obtain a bachelor's degree.

Literature on FGCS

FGCS tend to enroll in college and to graduate at a lower rate compared to their non-FGCS peers. One study found that only 24% of FGCS who enroll in college graduate compared to 68% for students whose parents were college graduates (Chen & Carroll, 2005). In terms of other characteristics, research on FGCS indicates that they are more likely to (1) be low income, (2) be a member of a racial or ethnic minority, (3) be a non-native English speaker, (4) live at home or off-campus, (5) take fewer credits or enroll part-time, and (6) work full time (Bui, 2002; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora 1996; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001).

Approximately 55% of FGCS take remedial courses compared to 27% of non-FGCS (Chen & Carroll, 2005) and the average SAT scores for FGCS have been reported as lower than their non-FGCS peers (Warburton et al., 2001). Other academic characteristics that have been attributed by researchers to FGCS include lower educational and degree aspirations (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996) and a lower likelihood of applying to graduate school (Choy, 2001).

Once on campus, FGCS are less likely to integrate into the campus culture (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; London, 1989; Pike & Kuh, 2005), with this situation likely a reflection of the reality that FGCS tend to live off-campus and work more hours than non-FGCS. Additionally, FGCS are reported as less likely to perceive faculty as caring and approachable (Jenkins et al., 2009; Pike & Kuh, 2005) and as possessing less understanding of the university institutional bureaucracy (Bui, 2002; Engle et al., 2006).

To address the challenges commonly experienced by FGCS, retention strategies are critical early in the students' college careers, before the students either drop out of college voluntarily or are forced to leave as a result of poor academic performance.

Supporting FGCS at the University of Kentucky

Indicators at UK demonstrated that FGCS at the institution faced many of the same challenges towards retention and graduation as demonstrated in national research studies. According to the Office of Institutional Research at UK, the first fall to third fall retention rate for the 2006 cohort was 59% for FGCS and 70.35% for non-FGCS. The four-year degree completion rate for the 2006 cohort was 20.5% for FGCS and 29.15% for non-FGCS. As part of a larger institutional "War on Attrition" initiated in 2007 by the university's provost, the university began to seek ways to provide greater and more coordinated assistance to its FGCS population.

In seeking to enhance the services provided to FGCS, the university did not start with a blank slate. Established programs were already in place at the university, including Student Support Services (SSS), the Robinson Scholars Program (RSP), Appalachian and Minority students in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Majors (AMSTEMM), and scholarships and services offered by the Center for Academic Resources and Enrichment Services (CARES). Twenty-nine high school students are selected annually to be Robinson Scholars. The students are from counties in Eastern Kentucky and are extended the opportunity to receive a full scholarship and accompanying support services to attend UK or a local community college as an incoming freshman. SSS is a federally funded TRIO program supporting students who are first generation, low-income, and/or have a documented disability as

they transition to college life. AMSTEMM is a program providing a community environment, a network of support services, and numerous academic enhancement opportunities to current undergraduate students.

Part of the reason UK was chosen as a location for the Suder Foundation to establish the First Scholars program was because of the existence of campus resources already available to first generation students at the university. The foundation wished to utilize existing resources while expanding the number of first generation students served.

First Scholars Program

With the First Scholars program, the Suder Foundation agreed to provide \$5,000 scholarships per year for two cohorts of students—20 students per cohort—for their undergraduate education. A student's scholarship can be renewed annually for up to four years. In addition to the scholarship, the students are required to live on campus during the first year and assigned a full-time scholarship advisor and a peer mentor. Programming efforts include study groups, workshops, and continual contact and programming with the First Scholars community. UK welcomed the inaugural First Scholars class in fall 2010 and enrolled the second one in fall 2011, for a total of 40 students currently in the program.

Intended to be part of a holistic program, First Scholars were selected based on criteria that included motivation and commitment in addition to grades and standardized test scores. To help account for these additional factors, applicants for the First Scholars program completed a Student Strengths Inventory (SSI), which measures non-cognitive indicators of success as nationally normed in six constructs, including academic engagement, educational commitment, campus engagement, social comfort, academic self-efficacy, and resiliency. Using the SSI,

students were selected for participation in the program. Students not selected were provided the opportunity to meet with the program coordinator and learn more about their score results. For students selected to participate in the First Scholars program, the SSI serves as a basis to create an individualized strategic plan (ISP), with students periodically re-taking the SSI during their time at UK to help assess their overall academic and personal development. The ISP is a key component of the program during the first year. Scholars refer to this document throughout their time in the program and create goals for each semester as well as overarching graduation objectives. The ISP is tailored to the individual student's needs and goals, and guided by the SSI results.

Building on the research dealing with FGCS and more generally on student success, the programming for each entering class has begun with a retreat to a state park the weekend following the start of the semester. At the retreat, students participate in a "Study Smarter" seminar, learn about their personalities and strengths and how they compare with their peers, engage with administrators from partner support programs, interact with campus faculty to learn about college expectations, learn about their peer mentors' college experiences, and connect with one another, forming a support system and community network intended to help enable them to be successful at UK during the upcoming academic year.

In their first semester, scholars are required to enroll in a university course (UK 101) that provides an overview of the college experience and permits students to learn about and explore resources on campus available to them. The students are enrolled in a section with a faculty member trained specifically to teach and support first generation students during their first semester. In the spring semester of their first year, students are required to enroll in a course (UK 110) designed to help students explore careers and majors and how they align with their own

individual strengths and interests. Throughout the year, scholars are also required to participate in academic workshops, enrichment activities, social activities, and to join a student organization. These components, in combination with support from their advisor, peers, and campus partners, help create an environment to support the scholars in achieving academic success.

Mentoring and academic enrichment and social activities continue through the students' sophomore year, with more of an emphasis placed on career development and addressing issues such as internships and what jobs and careers to consider based on a student's major. As the students progress through their academic career, additional programming and support services will be added.

The results of the first year of programming are promising. The initial student cohort was retained at 100% compared to a retention rate of approximately 82% for the entire freshman class at UK and 72.7% for UK first generation students. This initial group of First Scholars also obtained a grade point average that was higher than that for the freshmen class and for all first generation freshmen.

Next Steps: Scalability, Coordination of First Generation Services, and Establishment of First Generation Living Learning Community

A next step in the enhancement of the university's attention to this student population is the establishment of a living learning community. This goal seeks to build on lessons learned from the First Scholars program and from previous programming and services provided to FGCS at UK. This new living learning community, which will eventually house approximately 160 FGCS, welcomed its first 42 residents in Fall 2011. Space in a residence hall was renovated to

create an updated programming room, study room, lounge, and kitchen for first generation students, serving as a place where students can organize study groups and where individuals, groups, and offices from across campus can come to present workshops and provide other academic and support services. By creating a friendly place for students to “hang out” and in which to study, the goal is for these first generation students to become more connected to one another and to campus resources.

Another initiative undertaken by UK to enhance the awareness of first generation students is the UK First Generation (UK 1G) Stories Project, a collaboration between UK’s Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching and the First Scholars program. The purpose of the project is to record the unique stories of current faculty, staff, and students at UK who are first generation students to help inspire current UK first generation students who may be dealing with some of those same challenges faced by the individuals featured in the Stories Project.

The university has also recently created a Director of First Generation Initiatives to help promote collaboration and coordination among those programs and individuals serving FGCS. This includes efforts to expand UK 101 for first generation students, enhancing and expanding the living learning community, and working with faculty to provide education on strategies for engaging first generation students. The new position is also intended to help focus and promote efforts to expand the reach of services to first generation students at the university, including recruiting first generation students in middle and high schools and expanding the UK 1G Stories Project. The goal is to continue enhancing campus awareness of and dialogue about FGCS, including the expansion of resources and services for this group of students.

One of the key ways UK has fostered collaboration to impact first generation students across campus is the creation of a First Generation Advisory Board. Program directors from First Scholars, SSS, AMSTEMM, CARES, and RSC meet monthly to share information about program events, collaborate for trainings, and brainstorm regarding program challenges. This monthly gathering has resulted in shared resources during difficult economic times and the ability to partner for peer mentor recruitment and training, freshmen orientation, and the generation of ideas for expanding the reach of services to first generation students on a more campus-wide basis.

As institutions in Kentucky explore creative ways to retain students and to maximize resources, efforts focusing on FGCS can have a lasting impact on the Commonwealth. With college campuses becoming more diverse, FGCS will comprise a larger portion of the campus population at UK and at institutions across the state. It is important to note that while retention strategies that work for FGCS are likely to be successful for the general student population, strategies designed for the general campus population are not necessarily effective in retaining first generation students (Thayer, 2000). Thus, specific programmatic efforts aimed at FGCS can also serve the overall student population and may increase overall student retention and persistence to graduation, but the reverse is not necessarily true.

The experiences at UK related to enhancing support for FGCS suggest the following practice suggestions. Rather than an exclusive list, these five practice suggestions represent areas to help guide initial efforts in improving campus services and programs for FGCS:

1. Find the Data.

Are you asking students to self-identify on their admissions application? This provides a common data point that will provide the university or college with a starting point to

assess the number of first generation students on campus as well as track retention and graduation rates. Develop a relationship with the offices for institutional research and admissions to identify who the first generation students on your campus are and from where they come.

2. Help Instill a Sense of Community.

Rather than emphasizing to students the additional challenges often faced by FGCS, institutions instead should recognize these students' achievement in enrolling in college. Campuses can help instill a sense of community about being first generation by creating special sections of freshman seminar or orientation classes, developing unique summer advising conferences for FGCS, spotlighting first generation faculty and staff, and providing peer mentors to incoming first generation students to aid in transition.

3. Respond to the Needs of FGCS.

In addition to collecting demographic data, conduct campus focus groups and determine the needs of your first generation student population. FGCS come from a variety of backgrounds and need the support and encouragement of faculty, staff, and mentors through creative and timely programming.

4. Scholarships and Financial Aid.

FGCS may often have significant financial need, and allocating resources to supplement federal financial aid could result in decreased off-campus work and an increase in student retention. Federal funds are limited and some funding is allocated on a first come, first served basis. Encouraging students to apply early and providing financial counseling can benefit FGCS.

5. Engage Faculty and Staff.

In addition to being advocates for FGCS, support faculty and staff through a series of workshops, resources, and initiatives to bring awareness of common FGCS challenges and how to best enhance communication with FGCS on your campus.

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