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A Critical Analysis of the Identification and Treatment of First-Generation College Students: A Social Capital Approach

*Michael Peabody**

INTRODUCTION

This article examines how colleges and universities identify first-generation college students and how these students are treated once on campus. Utilizing a social capital lens I provide insight into campus student retention programs and propose recommendations for ways in which these students might be better served.

Several working definitions exist of first-generation college students. Some organizations refer to first-generation college students as those students whose parents have no formal education beyond high school. Others use a variation in which at least one parent has some formal education beyond high school, but did not attain a bachelor's degree. The U.S. Department of Education, through the Higher Education Act (1965, 1998), defines a first-generation college student 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 one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree.

Relying on the criteria adopted in much of the previous research (e.g., Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001), first-generation status is defined in this article as neither parent having any formal education beyond high school.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

First-generation college students represent one-third of the undergraduate student population at public four-year institutions and half of the population of two-year institutions (Choy, 2001).

Research on first-generation college students reveals several characteristics. First-generation college students tend to be low-income (Bui, 2002; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Jenkins, Miyazaki, & Janosik, 2009; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001), ethnic minority (Bui, 2002; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle

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& Tinto, 2008; Warburton et al., 2001), older than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Warburton et al., 2001;), and have a primary language other than English (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Warburton et al., 2001). First-generation college students also tend to live at home or off-campus (Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), take fewer credits or enroll part-time (Choy, 2001; Engle et al., 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini, Springer, Yates, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), and work full-time (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

In addition, first-generation college students tend to be less academically prepared entering college and take more remedial courses once enrolled (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle et al., 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Warburton et al., 2001). Chen and Carroll (2005) found that 55% of first-generation college students took remedial courses compared to 27% of continuing-generation students. In addition, Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) discovered differences in average SAT scores, with first-generation college students averaging 858 compared to 1011 for continuing-generation students. First-generation students also exhibited low educational and degree aspirations (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996) as well as a lower likelihood of applying to graduate school (Choy, 2001).

Once on campus, first-generation college students are less likely to integrate into the campus culture (Bryan & Simmons, 2009; London, 1989; Pike & Kuh, 2005). This is entirely understandable given that first-generation college students tend to live off-campus and work more hours than continuing-generation students. Also, first-generation students are less likely to perceive faculty as caring and approachable (Jenkins et al., 2009; Pike & Kuh, 2005) and have less understanding of the university institutional bureaucracy (Bui, 2002; Engle et al., 2006).

It has also been shown that first-generation college students persist and graduate at lower rates than their continuing-generation counterparts (Bui, 2002; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). Chen and Carroll (2005) determined that first-generation college students have a lower rate of bachelor degree attainment (23.5%) compared to students who had at least one parent attain a bachelor's degree (67.5%). In addition, Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001) found that first-generation college students were less likely to be enrolled at a four-year institution after three years than continuing-generation students by a rate of 68% to 86%. Finally, Choy (2001) found that first-generation college students were nearly twice as likely to drop out after their first year, with a difference of 23% to 10%, respectively.

In sum, first-generation college students are more likely to be low-income, minority, older, and non-native English speakers. They also tend to live off-campus, work more, take fewer classes, take more remedial courses, and have lower standardized test scores. First-generation college students are also less likely to approach a faculty member if they are struggling in a class, less likely to know of other institutional programs like tutoring centers, and less likely to consider applying for graduate school.

These findings describe a challenging situation for first-generation college students and highlight the need for colleges and universities to pay special attention to their needs and concerns. The factors listed above contribute to first-generation college students often being considered to be “at-risk” students by institutions. Utilizing theories of social capital can assist institutions in creating programs to help these students realize the goal of graduation.

CONCEPT AND CONTEMPORARY UNDERSTANDING OF “FIRST-GENERATION”

Determining the evolution and origins of a concept can prove problematic. Billson and Terry (1982) credit Fuji Adachi (1979) with coining the term “First-Generation College Student.” Anecdotal evidence from several other sources corroborates this attribution of the term to Adachi (Cervantes, 2005; Hodges, 1999; Payne, 2007). Billson and Terry indicate that Adachi defined the concept as applying to students who do not have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree. Adachi’s definition still remains as the definition used by the U.S. Department of Education.

Although the phrase “first-generation college student” may have originated in 1979, the concept has been in place for some time. The 1964 creation of Upward Bound in the Economic Opportunity Act, a part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty and first piece of the Great Society program, created a government sponsored program aimed at encouraging disadvantaged youths to attend college, including low-income students and students whose parents did not attend college (Cervantes, 2005). Focusing on students whose parents had not attended college was politically expedient, as it allowed the Office for Economic Opportunity to construct a congressional coalition of elected officials whose constituents were not only poor, but also may have been historically disenfranchised for other reasons, such as on the basis of race (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

Research focusing on first-generation college students began in earnest following a 1996 *Research in Higher Education* article entitled “First-Generation College Students: Characteristics, Experiences, and Cognitive Development” by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora. Currently, research on first-

generation college students tends to focus on first-generation status in conjunction with another characteristic, such as race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Theories of social capital can assist institutions of higher education in creating policies and practices that promote success for underserved populations, including first-generation students. Programs designed with an emphasis on developing social capital can be instrumental in assisting students to establish social networks on campus to help them persist and graduate. The following section provides a brief history of social capital theory, as well as an overview of the effects and common criticisms of social capital theories.

Development of Social Capital Theory

Theories of social capital came of age in the late twentieth century with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988). However, conceptually speaking, social capital has been part of the human experience since the dawn of time. As social animals, humans typically identify themselves by their social connections and their affiliations within groups. Nearly everyone has heard the expression *it's not what you know it's who you know*. This colloquialism embodies much of the essence of theories of social capital.

Robert Putnam, in his seminal work *Bowling Alone* (1995, 2000), credited the first use of “social capital” to Lyda Hanifan (1916). James Farr (2004) outlined a conceptual history of social capital in which he demonstrated an alternate history of the term. Farr contended that not only was Hanifan not the first to use the term, but that the concept of social capital had been in use for some time. It would be left to Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988) to provide a clearly defined contemporary concept of social capital.

Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as, “the aggregate of the actual of potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (p. 21). In *The Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu (1986) theorized a complex association between economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital and focused on the ability of an individual to transform his or her social capital into cultural or economic capital. Bourdieu’s treatment of social capital also described the individual benefits of membership in social groups and the deliberate construction of these groups (Portes, 1998).

Coleman’s (1988) most significant contribution to the concept of social capital was introducing the idea of “closure.” Closure is the existence of a sufficient number of ties between individuals that guarantees strict adherence to

social norms through a proliferation of obligations and expectations (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Coleman cites intergeneration closure, the ties between a generation of parents and a generation of children, as a critical binding force. The threat of ostracism that exists for those who defy these norms empowers informal associations and is the primary method by which these associations are able to maintain a high level of commitment by all members.

Following Bourdieu and Coleman, several scholars offered their interpretations of social capital (e.g. Baker, 1990; Burt, 1992; Schiff, 1992). As discussed by Portes (1998), in spite of distinctions, these various definitions share a basic consensus that social capital may be defined as the ability of individuals to secure some form of benefit by virtue of their membership in a group.

Effects of Social Capital

Portes (1998) described social capital as a source of: (1) social control; (2) family support; (3) benefits through extra-familial networks. Coleman also made a similar case, describing the effect of social capital in the family, outside the family, and as a public good. However, both Coleman and Bourdieu made clear their belief that the most important function of social capital involved the creation of human capital for the next generation (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

Social capital as social control or a public good describes the way in which social networks create a mechanism whereby parents, teachers, and other authorities maintain discipline and compliance among the general population (Portes, 1998). This idea is illustrated when one thinks of an individual as a member of a nation or state where there are shared social norms with respect to obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness as enforced by the law. Coleman, (1988) posited that this aspect of social capital created a situation in which the shared social norms of the group benefit not only those members of the group, but all individuals in the community (p. S116).

The role of the family in the creation of capital represented a central pillar in the arguments of both Bourdieu and Coleman. This aspect of social capital emphasizes the transmission of human capital via the social network between parents and children. Portes (1998) also identified the importance of this relationship between parents and children as a counterweight to loss of community bonds as children experience a break from their traditional network due to relocation, divorce, or other such events.

The benefits incurred by an individual's membership in a group or through a social network outside of the family represents a common function attributed to social capital (Portes, 1998). Coleman (1988), for instance, used the low drop-out rates for private Catholic schools and the respectively higher drop-out rates for

secular private schools as evidence of the importance of intergenerational closure and social capital.

While social capital is often viewed as bestowing benefits to groups and individuals, scholars also have pointed out its potentially negative effects. In particular, Portes (1998) identified four negative effects of social capital: (1) exclusion of outsiders; (2) excessive claims on members; (3) restrictions on individual freedoms; and (4) a downward leveling of norms.

In thinking about social capital and first-generation college students, it is important for colleges and universities to keep in mind the potential benefits associated with the accumulation of social capital. At the same time, institutions need to be aware that students lacking certain forms of social capital may face challenges not encountered by their peers, such as exclusion or lack of knowledge regarding how to navigate campus environments. Thus, colleges and universities benefit from an awareness of the potential benefits and problems associated with the amount of social capital possessed (or lacking) in students, with social capital concerns often especially relevant for first-generation college students.

IDENTIFICATION OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Currently, the most common way of identifying first-generation college students is through information gained from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or some other form of self-reporting. The FAFSA asks the student to report the highest grade each of their parents completed; junior high, high school, college, or unknown/other. Although submitting a FAFSA may be a requirement at some schools it is not a required for most students; therefore, students who submit a FAFSA tend to have a greater chance of being low-income students seeking financial assistance, which means that higher income first-generation students may go unidentified. Occasionally schools will ask a question regarding parental educational level on their applications for enrollment, similar to that on the FAFSA, but again this is often not the case and schools have found that some students will still leave this question blank. Thus, institutions may need to implement strategies, such as having academic advisors ask students, to learn about whether a student is first-generation.

TREATMENT OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

Theories of Student Retention

Alexander Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement was developed in order to "bring some order into the chaos" of student retention literature. The theory of student involvement was designed to be simplistic and refers to the

amount of physical and psychological energy a student devoted to the academic experience. This theory is not based on what an individual thinks or feels, but rather how the individual behaves and what they do that defines involvement (Astin, 1984).

Vincent Tinto's (1975) interactionist theory of student departure sought to delineate the differences between students leaving college due to voluntary withdrawal and involuntary withdrawal, as well as further illuminate the student departure process. This theory is institutionally-oriented as it attempts to explain the process of interactions between individuals and the institution that affect student departure (Tinto, 1975). William Tierney (1992) criticizes Tinto, asserting that this integrative model is essentially assimilation in disguise (Tanaka, 2002). However, Tinto has acknowledged that, "where it was once argued that retention required students to break away from their past communities, we now know that for some if not many students the ability to remain connected to their past communities, family, church, or tribe is essential to their persistence" (Tinto, 2006, p. 4).

These two theories continue to ring true as Pascarella et al. (2004) found that co-curricular involvement had a stronger positive effect for first-generation students than for other students. The authors concluded that such findings were consistent with the expectation that social capital gained through co-curricular activities and peer involvement may be particularly useful for first-generation students to attain the capital necessary for academic success and cognitive development. However, they also found that first-generation students are much less likely to be involved on campus than continuing-generation students. Thus, the students that would benefit the most from involvement are the least involved.

Utilizing a social capital lens, we are able to examine the theories proposed by Astin and Tinto to explain why involvement and integration are successful theories of student retention. Simply put, students who spend time on campus make connections to other students, expanding their social network and allowing them to acquire information about campus resources from a greater pool. Accordingly, social capital helps to make sense of the findings in student retention research and aligns with the student retention theories developed by figures such as Astin and Tinto.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Student retention programs on college campuses tend to be designed utilizing a theoretical foundation built upon the research of Tinto and Astin, and thus, place a particular emphasis on involvement and integration. Popular retention programs include: Living-Learning Communities, peer-mentors, faculty-mentors, freshman seminars, student organizations, and summer-to-semester transition programs.

Each of these programs has been shown to be significant contributors to student success and cognitive development (Cuseo, 1991; Good, Halpin, & Halpin, 2000; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; McCurrie, 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004; Sanchez-Leguelinel, 2008, Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996; Stassen, 2003; Stokes, Gonzalez, Rowe, Romero, Adams, Lyons, & Rayfield, 1988) and each is firmly rooted in social capital theory.

The theories of student retention conceived by Tinto and Astin share a primary attribute with social capital theories in that they utilize various forms of capital of a socialized nature which focuses on the existence of an association between actors. In the case of Tinto and Astin, the actors tend to be the student and the institution or representatives of the institution.

In order to fully benefit social capital theories in efforts to increase the retention and graduation of first-generation college students, institutions should pay particular attention to several issues. One of the most important issues for institutions is the prevalence and affordability of campus residence halls. Students should spend considerable time on campus and residing on campus is the most direct means to this end. Astin (1984) stresses the importance of residence halls on campus, noting that eating, sleeping, and walking on a campus helps students develop a strong attachment and identification to the college. Theories of social capital would suggest that living in campus residence halls would allow students to benefit from membership in a group by establishing social networks and beginning to identify the social norms and values necessary to be successful on campus.

Related to campus housing, special attention ought to be paid to family housing for first-generation college students. As first-generation students tend to be older and married (Pascarella et al., 2004) simply providing an off-campus apartment will likely not effectively provide these students with a connection to campus. Institutions need to pay special attention to ways to involve these students in campus life, but in ways that recognize the additional family dynamics present with these students.

An often overlooked aspect related to keeping students on campus relates to work-study and campus employment. First-generation students tend to be low-income and work more hours than continuing-generation students (Choy, 2001). Thus, for this group of students work-study becomes an important aspect of their academic experience. Those forced to work off campus due to low wages, insufficient available hours, or having reached their federal work-study allotment are likely to find themselves designated as “at-risk” students. Also, relying on the college for income may facilitate the formation of an attachment to campus and lead to greater retention (Astin, 1984). Therefore, for this group of students it is imperative to assure that institutions provide sufficient wages so that first-

generation students are able to remain on-campus rather than seeking more profitable employment off-campus.

Finally, first-generation college students often view co-curricular activities as superfluous in comparison with their academic pursuits (Inkelas et al., 2007). This leads to first-generation students opting out of peer-mentor, freshman seminar, and summer bridge programs. To help address this issue, mechanisms should exist for providing academic credit for participation in campus organizations and activities. Without incentivizing participation it is likely first-generation students will simply ignore them and focus exclusively on their studies and work responsibilities. Without engaging in campus activities the social norms so essential for closure will not be transmitted and the student may not be able to make as strong of connections to campus.

First-generation students often come to campus with less institutional knowledge and understanding of how campus bureaucracies work than their continuing-generation counterparts. In order to help these students be successful, institutions, beyond simply providing scholarship, should provide programming and opportunities that help to integrate these students into campus life. Attention to theories of social capital can assist institutions in developing programs that are successful in retaining and graduating first-generation college students.

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