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PROMOTING RESILIENCY AMONG FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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On a momentous day in May, six unlikely students walked across the graduation stage of a competitive, private university to receive their bachelor's degrees. All six were participants in our study of successful first-generation college (FGC) students. Extensive research investigated the high attrition rates of FGC students and enumerated obstacles that led them to drop out. Our research took a different approach. Through in-depth interviews, we explored the way resilient FGC students navigated around obstacles and what supported their success. By definition, resilient individuals succeed despite characteristics that predict their failure. Stories from this study offer practical implications for advisers seeking to create university environments that support resiliency.

The university can be a difficult place for people whose parents never attained a bachelor's degree. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001), only 9.1 percent of students whose parents earned at least a bachelor's degree drop out of college. In comparison, 20.5 percent of students whose parents did not attend college withdraw. The attrition rate of students whose parents attended but did not complete college remains a high 17.1 percent.

The gap between FGC students' attrition rates and that of their later-generation peers has been explained in a number of different ways. Chief among these are academic preparation, financial strain, identity issues, and social capital. First, the concern that FGC students generally lack academic preparation is not borne out in the research literature (Saenz, Hurtando, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Terenzini & Springer, 1996). FGC students' low academic self-efficacy (i.e., their perceptions of their own academic ability) may account for higher dropout rates whereas high self-efficacy has been linked both to high retention and resiliency (Clauss-Ehlers, & Wibrowski, 2007; Saenz, Hurtando, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; Lehmann, 2007; Kanevsky, Cork, & Frangkiser, 2008; Mayo, Helms, & Codjoe, 2004).

Second, financial strain may contribute to attrition rates. FGC students are twice as likely to worry about financing college as their later-generation peers (Saenz, Hurtando, Barerra, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). However, researchers have come to differing conclusions on whether the stress of working to pay for school is a key reason that FGC students leave universities (Billson & Terry, 1982; Lehman, 2007).

Third, FGC students may leave the university because of identity dissonance. They may feel, on one hand, like outsiders within the university. FGC students are less likely to be integrated into the university because they are “less likely to live on campus, be involved in campus organizations, meet or pursue their most important friendships on campus, or work on campus” (Billson & Terry, 1982, p. 73). They are more likely to have dependent children, be older, be Hispanic, and to expect to spend more years working on their degrees than later-generation students (Terenzini & Springer, 1996). On the other hand, gaining an academic degree may create a measure of isolation from families and communities of origin (Billson & Terry, 1982; Jenkins, 1996). When FGC students feel forced to choose between identities, they may give up who they want to become in favor of their communities of origin (Lehmann, 2007).

Fourth, social capital appears to be important to all students as they move through college. Social capital consists of one’s social network and the knowledge and access that network provides (Portes, 1998). Social capital, for example, is drawn upon when finding financial aid, choosing a major, or locating campus jobs that allow students to study. Many assume FGC students lack social capital because their parents do not have access to networks of college-educated people (Richardson & Skinner, 1992). Additionally, FGC students may experience less support from their families (Lehmann, 2007; McConnell, 2000; Thayer, 2000; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). On campus, university staff and faculty and, to a lesser extent, peers can act as “cultural brokers” that let FGC students into the campus social network (Clauss-Ehlers & Wibrowski, 2007; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008).

While academic preparation, financial strain, identity, and social capital have all been used to explain why FGC students are at higher risk for university attrition, little research looks at the way these concepts interact within individual students and the ways students overcome these obstacles. Using a qualitative approach, we explored how FGC students overcome obstacles at a selective, private university in the Midwest and how lessons from their experiences can help academic advisers reduce attrition rates among FGC students.

METHODS

University Context

The participants of this study were drawn from the population of undergraduate students at a competitive, mainly residential, Catholic university in the Midwest with more than 6,000 undergraduate students. A majority of the student body at the university is of traditional undergraduate age, and 90.8 percent of the student body is White.

Participants

Six participants were selected from a group of twenty-five volunteers to represent both genders and a variety of majors. The participants included four women and two men representing each of the university’s four divisions: Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, and Engineering. All participants were seniors and White. One participant was 29 years old, the rest were either 21 or 22. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants’ confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant was interviewed for thirty to sixty minutes using an interview protocol. The resulting 126 pages of transcripts were thematically coded (Rubin & Rubin, 1995; Seidman, 2006) for references to academic preparation, financial strain, identity, and social capital. Based on the coding, cases for each student were written and confirmed by the participants. Cross-case analysis compared results in each area across the experiences of the six participants.

DISCUSSION

FGC research literature suggests four chief factors that place FGC students at risk for attrition: academic preparation, financial strain, identity issues, and social capital. A discussion regarding the findings of this study in relation to each of the four factors from a resiliency perspective follows. Finally, suggestions are presented for creating a university environment that promotes greater resiliency among FGC students.

Academic Preparation

Our findings suggest that academic preparation may be too simplistic an explanation of the reason why FGC students fail. Our participants' academic preparation in itself did not prove to be an obstacle to their college success and, when present, was tempered by their self-efficacy and personality. Three of the six participants experienced little difficulty and were ahead of their peers in some subject areas. Two participants, Anna and Jennifer, who attended the most disadvantaged high schools, found themselves behind peers in math and science. One student, Nick, struggled with writing.

Consistent with previous research, participants' academic self-efficacy had a great impact on how they handled obstacles presented by lack of academic preparation. For example, Anna's academic preparation became a stumbling block because of her low self-efficacy in math. She explained, "I felt isolated because a lot of times...I was the only one who had a question...I was the one who didn't get it." The combination of her low self-efficacy and introverted personality meant she often felt intimidated approaching professors and took longer to ask questions of peers or join a study group. In contrast, Nick considered himself to be someone who does well in school. After realizing he was earning B's instead of A's because of his writing ability, he read writing handbooks and consulted professors. As a result, his grades improved.

Financial Strain

A common theme among this resilient group of FGC students was the use of strategies to minimize the impact of financial strain. For example, Nick's choice of university was based solely on the amount of scholarship money he received. Kevin, the only participant who received any family financial support, did not study abroad out of respect for his parents' financial situation. All of the participants worked between ten and forty hours a week during the academic year. Kiley deliberately found jobs that would allow her to do her homework. Jennifer had left her first university for financial reasons. Feeling valued by her current

university and determined to finish, she took classes full time, worked forty hours a week, and paid tuition on a monthly plan.

Participants varied in the way the financial strain affected their motivation. Over the years, recurring monetary concerns had intruded on Martha's ability to focus on schoolwork. She explained, "Trying to figure out whether you are going back to school...that doesn't really motivate you to do a whole lot of work at the present time.' In contrast, the experience of financial strain propelled Anna's determination to graduate and major in engineering, rather than follow her passion for art. She explained, 'I heard about how much my grandma and grandpa struggled working two and three jobs when they were younger, and I knew how much my aunts and uncles and my mom had worked since they were really young, so I guess everyone in the family just...encouraged me to be smart and try to go to school so that way, when I got out and got a job, I didn't have to work as hard as they did.'

Identity

The participants in this study reported very little of the painful identity dissonance discussed in the literature (Billson & Terry, 1982; Lehman, 2007). On the contrary, the identity distinctions drawn by the participants were beneficial. The participants all perceived themselves to be more committed to their education or more appreciative of the opportunities it gave them than their later-generation peers. For five of the six participants, their FGC status was a point of pride and source of resilience.

Social Capital

Consistent with the findings of Moschetti & Hudley (2008), the participants in this study seemed to have ready access to the social-capital networks on campus. This access was enhanced by personal attention provided by faculty and staff. The qualitative nature of our study also revealed sources of social capital typically neglected in the research literature. Peers, technology-based resources, and families offered essential, though differing, social capital, while the participants' personalities influenced their use of available support.

Personal attention seemed to be a key factor in retaining these students. For example, Jennifer noted she had withdrawn from less expensive universities. However, feeling respected as an individual by faculty and staff was an important factor in her retention at her current university. Contrary to the findings of Terenzini & Springer (1996), all of the participants could name at least one professor or university employee who had been personally engaged in their development. Most could also name professors who had provided some sort of social capital, for example, by providing information about what classes to take to prepare for graduate school.

The participants also explained that resident assistants, peers, and technology-based resources (e.g., Internet, campus-wide e-mails, and campus cable television networks) provided information and access typically associated with social capital. Jennifer, the non-traditional student, was the only participant who attributed her lack of college knowledge to her first

generation status. It appears that living off campus limited her access to peer and technology resources while the residential students were immersed in them.

Contrary to a great quantity of the research (Thayer, 2000; McConnell, 2000; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991; Terenzini & Springer, 1996; Lehman, 2007), family support was a significant contributor to our participants' success. However, family support may take forms unrecognized in the literature. All of the participants experienced important support from their families, including emotional support during stressful times, expressions of enthusiasm and pride in their accomplishments, unconditional support for their decisions, and being role models of hard work. It was, in part, this legacy of hard work that spurred Anna and Kevin to work hard at the university. Personality traits, which are neglected in the FGC literature, greatly affected the participants' access to social capital. The two participants who self-identified as being "shy" had more difficulty accessing social networks by asking professors and peers for help. A third participant's insistence on doing everything himself limited his access to social capital.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRACTICE

The factors that influence FGC student retention are multiple and interact with each other. For example, how students manage financial strain is buffeted by their access to social capital and even by their identity as FGC students. Therefore, we recommend that university personnel who support FGC students' success take a holistic approach to promoting resiliency that is responsive to the individual needs of FGC students. Research suggests environments that most successfully promote resiliency communicate high expectations of students coupled with necessary support to reach them; foster caring relations grounded in respect, listening, and compassion; and provide meaningful opportunities for participation in the community (Bernard, 2004). The following suggestions for promoting resiliency stem from the stories of the FGC students in our study. The suggestions may be supportive of later-generation students' resiliency as well.

Make the Systems Apparent

FGC students, as well as many of their later-generation peers, need to be aware of the structure of the university, available programs, and sources of support. Unspoken rules of higher education also need to be made apparent. For example, students may benefit from explicit encouragement to seek help from professors and tips on finding jobs that allow studying. Face-to-face, paper, and technology-based resources should all be considered.

Student Mentoring

A peer or faculty mentoring program would allow universities to offer FGC students individualized assistance, support, and advocacy. Mentors might be trained to address self-efficacy and stress management. Mentors do spring up naturally through extracurricular and scholastic interactions, but the option of a mentoring program may benefit students who need a guiding hand in the beginning and may help reduce initial isolation.

The Importance of Faculty

Faculty members are often in a unique position to support students. Universities might consider training faculty to be sensitive to issues critical to FGC student retention. Personalized attention from faculty can make the difference between retention and attrition.

Recognize the Positive Contribution of FGC Status to Identity

FGC status is often associated with the risk of dropping out of college. However, FGC status can be a source of resiliency and pride. Universities can encourage pride and create role models by noting FGC status when publishing the accomplishments of alumni, faculty, and staff. Universities may also consider how their mission and culture connect to students' identity and create a sense of belonging for FGC students.

Respect and Include Families

Although FGC students' families have had little contact with universities, they influence their students' success. FGC families may not contribute in traditional ways (e.g., paying tuition, traveling to parents' weekend, advising on majors and collegiate life). However, families can serve as important motivators (Gofen, 2009), emotional supporters, and role models. Universities can ensure FGC families feel welcome and have positive avenues of communication with the university. This could bolster an important source of support and lessen potential identity dissonance.

We hope that the findings and suggestions from our study will be of help to professionals who support FGC students. Like all studies, this one has limitations. First, the small sample size makes it difficult to determine wider trends among FGC students. Second, all of the participants attended a selective, private Catholic university, probably reducing the likelihood that students lacked academic preparation and increasing a sense of common identity and community within the student body. Third, all of the participants were White. Different identity issues could arise for minority FGC students.

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