

(Why) Should Social Work Be Concerned About First-Generation College Students?

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Abstract

This article presents an argument for attention to the experiences of first-generation college students in the context of social work. The needs of first-generation college students are explored as well as their strengths in connections to families and community. Attention to first-generation college students is important to social work for at least two reasons: because of who first-generation students are and because of the values held by social work as a profession. The social work values of social justice, the dignity and worth of each person, as well as the value of human relationships provide a framework for social work to consider the needs of first-generation college students.

Keywords: social work, teaching, first-generation college students

Educational attainment is an increasingly important part of ensuring one's self-determination in the contemporary United States. The link between educational attainment and income is well understood (for an example, see Day & Neuberger, 2002), but educational attainment has also been shown to be one of the most powerful social determinants of health (Mirowsky & Ross, 2005). Haveman and Smeeding (2006) argue that one of the most valued goals of higher education in the United States is supporting social mobility. However, these authors also lament the fact that family background is increasingly a strong predictor of educational attainment. Students whose families lack experience with higher education may be unable to navigate access to college for students or support them in persisting and completing college (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Reid & Moore, 2008). To date, the needs of these students have been the focus of fields other than social work. This paper examines the experiences of first-generation college students and reveals connections to several core values of social work, adding a social work perspective to the literature on first-generation students.

In the past few decades, access to higher education has improved for students who come from groups which have typically been underrepresented on college campuses. Approximately one-third to one-half of these students are first-generation college students (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Strayhorn, 2006). A growing body of literature details the challenges of first-generation college students, with these students reporting lower levels of academic preparation for college (Bui, 2002; Reid & Moore, 2008), earning lower GPAs, completing fewer credits, and withdrawing or repeating courses at higher rates than their peers whose parents completed college (Chen, 2005). First-generation college students report lower levels of psychological well-being following their first year in college (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012) and were more likely to leave college by their second year (Choy, 2001). While more recent analyses of National Educational Longitudinal Study Data have revealed that first-generation college students are just as likely to stay in college as their peers, these analyses also demonstrate that first-generation college students move through college much more slowly. A follow up study in 2000 of students who had graduated from high school in 1992 found that first-generation college students had earned approximately half as many credits as their peers whose parents had completed college (66 compared to 112) (Chen, 2005).

Traditionally, the needs of first-generation college students have been documented by sociologists and education researchers; social work has not been active in the discussion (P. Collier, personal communication, Nov. 21, 2013)¹. Cole's (2008) narrative analysis of the educational stories of low-income first-generation college students provides one of the few examples of research in social work documenting the needs of first-generation college students. In her interviews with 22 first-generation college students, academic challenges were prominent among the stories of students who left college. Students attributed their academic challenges to pre-college ability, balancing the many demands on their time, their inability to meet the standards of their chosen majors, and lacking strategies to improve academic performance. Distress related to grade performance was an underlying feature of all of the stories of students who had faced academic challenges. Attention to the needs of first-generation college students is important to social work for at least two reasons: because of who first-generation college students are and because of the values held by social work as a profession. Social work's values of social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, and the value of human relationships suggest that the needs of first-generation students are within the scope of social work and that social workers may be equipped to address those needs (NASW, 2008).

Social work's value of social justice asks social workers to focus on social change, particularly when that change addresses the needs of members of groups who face oppression, discrimination, and marginalization (NASW, 2008). Demographic patterns in the group of people who are first-generation college students indicate the need for attention to the ways that race, class, and gender structure opportunities for educational attainment. First-generation students are more likely to face educational barriers related to institutional racism, with African-American and Hispanic students overrepresented in some samples of first-generation students (Chen, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora., 1996) and Asian and Latino students overrepresented in others (Bui, 2002). First-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families (Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996) and women tend to be over-represented among first-generation college students, with the proportions of women in samples of first-generation students ranging from a low of 55% (Bui, 2002) to a high of 71% (Padgett et al., 2012). Terenzini and colleagues (1996) noted the higher proportion of women among first-generation students in their sample (61%) than in their sample of traditional students (53% were women). As Cole (2008) noted, first-generation students are often members of groups that social workers are likely to interact with in their day-to-day work. That is, first-generation students are more likely than traditional students to experience marginalization, discrimination, and oppression because of one or more aspects of their identity (race, class, and gender). Investing in the education of first-generation students is one of the most lasting and effective interventions possible, and social workers are uniquely suited to address educational barriers related to both historical and contemporary experiences of racism, classism, and sexism (Cole, 2008). Social work compels scholars and practitioners to consider not just an individual's

¹ For more on this, the reader is directed to the works of Howard London (1989,1992, 1996), a sociologist who studied transformations experienced by first-generation students, or Peter Collier and David Morgan (2008), sociologists who have studied academic integration of first-generation students and the of place of cultural capital in fulfilling the student role. The reader is also directed towards the publications of Ernest Pascarella or Patrick Terenzini, both in education, who have written at length about the cognitive and psychosocial outcomes of first generation students.

abilities, behaviors, and characteristics, but to also notice the larger social contexts individual experiences arise from at the interpersonal, organizational, and structural levels. Furthermore, the value of social justice compels social work to consider the needs of first-generation college students as members of groups who have traditionally been excluded from higher education. Social change focused on addressing issues of poverty and unemployment are central to the value of social justice, and the links between educational attainment and economic need are clear. Supporting first-generation college students in the pursuit of higher education is the work of social work.

Second, social work's value of the dignity and worth of the person suggests that the needs of first-generation college students are important to social work. Central to this value is the responsibility for supporting the self-determination of individuals as well as a responsibility to larger society (NASW, 2008). Educational attainment, particularly the completion of a bachelor's degree, is one of the most reliable methods of ensuring economic independence and a level of self-determination. But research detailing the experiences of first-generation college students suggests that for many first-generation college students, they are not the sole beneficiaries of their college education. Several studies describe the centrality of family relationships to first-generation college students (Bradbury & Maher, 2009; Bui, 2002; Stieha, 2010); "carrying" family is a common theme among students (Orbe, 2004). In one of the few accounts of a first-generation student in social work, Carter-Black (2008), describing her journey through undergraduate education, recalls

"I carried much more than just the things in my suitcases that day as I left home. I also carried the hope of my family all bundled up and neatly tucked away inside where no one else could see. I was keenly aware of my precious cargo" (p. 113).

As the first in their family to attend college, many first-generation college students report feeling that their academic success had a bearing on the futures of family members (Orbe, 2004). An analysis of Bui's (2002) reasons that students give for attending college also supports connections to and responsibility for family. First-generation students were more likely to report attending college so they could bring honor to their families, and help their families out financially after college. They were less likely to report attending college because their siblings had also attended, and less likely to report that they were attending college out of a desire to leave home. Some first-generation students may serve as a bridge to college for their families and larger community. In focus groups of first-generation college students, students reported being asked to translate their experiences for community members who had no lived experiences of college (Orbe, 2004).

However, the literature on first-generation college students also reports that some feel the need to break away from families (London, 1989) and several authors note the struggles first-generation college students face in integrating within the college setting. In Stuber's (2011) interviews with white, working class, first-generation college students, approximately one-quarter of her sample reported persistent feelings of alienation and marginalization in college. Often these experiences of marginalization were centered on economic needs that felt out of place in college, such as working up to 35 hours each week or living at home to save money.

Relationships with faculty may be a critical piece of integration for first-generation college students, who were less likely to report feeling supported by faculty than their peers, (Terenzini et al., 1996). Padgett and colleagues (2012) noted that teaching interactions with faculty did not have the same beneficial effect for first-generation students as they did for peers. While traditional students benefitted from “good practices,” such as increased faculty interaction, these practices were related to lower levels of well-being among first-generation students. Collier and Morgan’s (2008) work sheds light on one aspect of this disconnect between first-generation students and faculty: first-generation students struggled more with understanding and meeting faculty expectations about workload and priorities, interpreting assignments, communicating with faculty and solving problems as they arose. Many researchers have employed a cultural capital model in understanding the experiences of first-generation college students, emphasizing the ways that families impart knowledge that ensures or limits success in the classroom based on the values that structure higher education (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Padgett et al., 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004, Stuber, 2011). But few studies to date have explicitly focused on the relational worlds of first-generation college students. Social work recognizes the important roles that human relationships play in strengthening individuals, families, organizations, and communities, and as such is especially positioned to increase understanding of the relationships that support first-generation college students, and may in turn support others as well.

Higher education classrooms are increasingly open to students who are the first in their families to pursue education beyond high school. For these students, college presents the opportunity for self-determination and potential social mobility, but it also carries risk. An examination of the experiences of first-generation college students with attention to the core values of social work suggests that these experiences are within the scope of social work, and that social work may be well suited to attend to the needs of first-generation college students. This paper invites social work scholars to consider research that focuses on the experiences of the growing numbers of first-generation students. This paper also has pedagogical implications for social work educators: who are our students? Attention to first-generation students in schools of social work is important for recruiting and retaining a diverse group of social workers and professional helpers (Casstevens, Waites, & Outlaw, 2012), and infusing social work values of justice and diversity in higher education (Saulnier & Swigonski, 2006).

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