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Complete Issue

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Table of Contents



About the Journal.....	3
Affiliations.....	4
JCA Editorial Board.....	5
Coming Soon: Special Issues.....	6
From the Editors.....	7
Guest Perspective: Angel B. Pérez.....	8-11
Chief Executive Officer, National Association for College Admission Counseling	
Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports.....	12-25
Sophie W. Schuyler (<i>University of Massachusetts Boston</i>), Jonique R. Childs (<i>University of Massachusetts Amherst</i>), Timothy A. Poynton (<i>University of Massachusetts Boston</i>)	
Student Readiness of Colleges: A Qualitative Study	26-42
Karen Widger Caldwell (<i>University of Michigan-Dearborn</i>), Cala Millis (<i>University of Michigan-Dearborn</i>), Timothy N. Constant (<i>University of Michigan-Dearborn</i>), Patrick Borg (<i>University of Michigan-Dearborn</i>), Katherine Threatt-Morgan (<i>University of Michigan-Dearborn</i>), Christopher J. F. Burke (<i>University of Michigan-Dearborn</i>)	
College Access for Prospective First-generation High School Students: Parent Perceptions.....	43-60
Christopher Brown (<i>Southern Illinois University Edwardsville</i>), Alison Reeves (<i>Southern Illinois University Edwardsville</i>), Laurel Puchner (<i>Southern Illinois University Edwardsville</i>)	



About the Journal



An Overview

The *Journal of College Access* (JCA) focuses on the current trends, research, practices, and development of all types of programs, policies, and activities related to the access of and success in postsecondary education. Issues of college aspiration, qualification, application, enrollment, and persistence are the primary emphases.

The Journal was co-founded by Dr. Patrick O'Connor and Dr. Christopher Tremblay. O'Connor is Chief Strategist and CEO of College is Yours, an organization dedicated to expanding college opportunity. He is a board member and past chair of the Michigan College Access Network (MCAN). Tremblay is Director of Admissions and Recruiting for the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan.

Launched in March 2014, JCA is a part of Western Michigan University's ScholarWorks, a digital showcase of research, scholarly and creative output.



CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

We accept submissions year round.

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Affiliations



The *Journal of College Access* is affiliated with the Michigan College Access Network, the Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success (CPRS) and the Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA).



MICHIGAN COLLEGE ACCESS NETWORK

MCAN is a statewide non-profit organization with a mission to increase college readiness, participation, and completion in Michigan, particularly among low-income students, first-generation college going students, and students of color.

micollegeaccess.org



**The Center for
Postsecondary
Readiness and Success**

The goal of the Center for Postsecondary Readiness and Success is to increase equitable and accessible pathways to postsecondary success for all people. Located at American University in Washington, D.C., the Center creates aligned systems, driven by student outcomes to disseminate new knowledge and discovery of college and career readiness and persistence models, while simultaneously connecting this new knowledge to K-12 and higher education policy formation.

american.edu/centers/cprs



**SAN DIEGO STATE
UNIVERSITY**

Center for Equity and
Postsecondary Attainment

The Center for Equity and Postsecondary Attainment (CEPA) focuses on promoting equitable access to viable postsecondary pathways and opportunities. Guided by diverse student and parent perspectives, CEPA aims to create college and career counseling and advising practices that reconnect with and elevate the voices of those who have been historically marginalized and excluded. All students deserve access to high quality guidance that supports both individual and collective needs, challenges inequitable and racist school-based systems and policies, and promotes postsecondary opportunities.

education.sdsu.edu/cepa

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Coming Soon: Special Issues



We have three special issues in progress focused on these important topics:

College Access and Success for Undocumented Students

This issue will reveal the challenges and opportunities for undocumented students in their pursuit of and completion of higher education.

Guest Editors:

Diana Camilo, University of Mississippi

Belinda Zamacona, University of California-San Diego

Access and Blackness:

Antiracist College Counseling and Advising

This issue will offer innovative perspectives or interventions in the context of college and career readiness, as it pertains to antiracist counseling and advising and postsecondary access of Black students. To combat the racist structures which pervade the career counseling and college counseling/advising fields, and disproportionately marginalize Black students, practitioners working with Black youth must be equipped with Antiracist frameworks.

Guest Editors:

Ian P. Levy, Manhattan College

Caroline Lopez-Perry, California State University Long Beach

Equity-Based Career Development and Postsecondary Readiness

The special issue will focus on manuscripts using an equity-based career development lens to prepare at-risk, minoritized, special needs, and vulnerable populations for postsecondary opportunities. The former first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama, created two initiatives (Reach Higher Initiative and Better Make Room) aimed at exposing young people to college and career planning as well as emphasizing the need for everyone to obtain additional education and training beyond a high school diploma. This special edition will build on these two initiatives and focus on preparing students from vulnerable populations for optimal career and postsecondary outcomes.

Guest Editors:

Erik Hines, Associate Professor, Florida State University

Renae Mayes, Associate Professor, University of Arizona



From the Editors



Authored by
Dr. Patrick O'Connor
Dr. Christopher W. Tremblay
Dr. Laura Owen




This edition of the Journal takes a look at three important areas of research that often get overlooked in considering a student's successful transition to college.

While college access is often seen as the process of applying to college, Schuyler et al. take a look at three key elements of college access that play pivotal roles in a successful transition to college once the application process is over – academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. Their conclusions offer tangible directions colleges can take in assessing these supports, and determining their success with the students they serve.

Ample literature exists when considering the topic of student readiness, but most of these studies focus on the student, not the college. Caldwell et al. look at these same construct from the eyes of one college – specifically, what does one college do to support student efforts to be college ready, and how do the members of the college community feel about those efforts?

This edition closes with a look at a key support group for students who will be the first in their family to go to college. Many high schools recognize the vital role served by the parents of these students – but are the high schools getting through? Brown et al. take an in-depth look at this question through research that is highlighted by asking the parents of first gen students if their college readiness needs are being met.

We are grateful to publish a perspective piece about higher education advocacy from NACAC President Angel B. Pérez.

This is the first of several volumes JCA is publishing this year. Come back for our special editions, the first of which is due out in less than two months! 



Guest Perspective: Advocating for Higher Education as a Public Good



Authored by
Angel B. Pérez
National Association for College Admission Counseling
(NACAC)

The National Association for College Admission Counseling, founded in 1937, is the professional home for more than 23,000 members who serve students in the transition to postsecondary education. NACAC is a trusted source of educational programming and resources that support college counseling and admission professionals in their work with students and families. In addition to serving members directly, NACAC is undergoing a process of transformation to assume a greater role in broader conversations about college access and equity and to become the go-to source for information on the college counseling and admission processes.



Advocating for Higher Education as a Public Good

The guiding principle behind NACAC's reinvention is this conviction—If a postsecondary education is the key to prosperity and social mobility, then access to college should be considered a basic human right. NACAC's September 2020 report, *Roadmap for Change: Reimagining US Higher Education as a Public Good*, makes clear that reimagining postsecondary education with

the interests of students first will require a rethinking of policies and practices across society. Among the recommendations outlined in the report are:

- Redesign college admission policy and practice to focus on the centrality of individual students.
- Emphasize transparency as a critical policy measure to restore trust in higher education.
- Enact public policy that recommits our nation to postsecondary access and success.
- Strengthen policies and practices aimed at protecting students' rights and interests in the transition to postsecondary education.
- Implement well-crafted, fully funded public higher education policies to alleviate uncertainty faced by students and institutions alike.

NACAC's shift in advocacy focus was catalyzed, in part, by the Department of Justice investigation of NACAC's ethical code, which compelled NACAC to move beyond a role of self-regulation. In lieu of this role, the association is shifting its considerable



Guest Perspective: Angel B. Pérez

energy and passion to focus on education and advocacy efforts – with the media, policymakers, professionals, students, and families.

Confronting Racism and Unconscious Bias

NACAC believes it is critical that college admission counseling professionals be aware of systemic inequities and racism, and that the association assist in equipping the profession with antiracist and pro-equity tools. For more than 40 years, NACAC has offered its Guiding the Way to Inclusion (GWI) conference to both serve professionals from racial and ethnic minority backgrounds seeking to advance through the college admission counseling profession and to provide educational offerings focused on advising and recruiting under-represented students. More recently, NACAC launched an Antiracist Education Institute, a four-part professional development series designed specifically for college counseling and admission professionals that increases knowledge in antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Institute features sessions on inclusive hiring practices in college admission and counseling, understanding cultural identity and micro-aggressive office environments, environmental harm for students of color, and appropriate practices and strategies to eliminate bias when advising or considering students for college admission.

NACAC has also begun work, in partnership with the National Association of Student

Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA), to implement a grant from the Lumina Foundation to reimagine the college admission and financial aid practices through the lens of racial equity. A panel of thought leaders has been assembled to consider entry challenges to postsecondary education for traditional-aged and adult students of color and examine ways in which an admission and financial aid system would be designed if racial and ethnic equity were the primary objective. The goal of the panel is to move beyond theories of equity and make specific, actionable recommendations for policymakers, which would include a guide for colleges centered around racial/ethnic inclusion, a related guide for postsecondary institutional leaders, and recommendations for federal and state policymakers for an equity-based college transition.

Holistic Admission and the Role of Standardized Testing

Even before the pandemic forced changes in the college admission process, NACAC was taking a critical look at the role of standardized testing. An expert group of NACAC members participated in a year-long Task Force on Standardized Admission Testing for International and US Students, which culminated in a 2020 report that called on colleges to examine their ACT and SAT policies and practices. Most notably, the report highlights the inequities associated with standardized testing for college-bound

Guest Perspective: Angel B. Pérez

students, which were only exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

NACAC called on colleges, particularly public institutions, to make standardized admission tests optional during the pandemic. The association also launched a “test-optional means test-optional campaign,” which allowed colleges to make a public commitment to students and families not to penalize applicants who didn’t submit test scores. The association has also provided guidance and professional development opportunities to assist colleges with making this transition, including Tales of a Test-Optional Year. NACAC also collected data, released in July, that indicated colleges’ in-person and virtual plans for Fall 2021, testing requirements for Fall 2022, and any pandemic-related changes in admission criteria.

Earlier this year, NACAC and The Character Collaborative launched the first in a seven-course series designed to provide guidance on the value of character attributes in colleges and schools. The new course reviews the challenges in assessing character, the core principles of character assessment, selecting tools for evidence of character, determining effective ways to rate character, and developing a sound decision-making process. Over the next year additional courses will be released, covering such topics as character assessment, writing letters of recommendation, and evaluating the impact of character in admission.

Connecting Students to Colleges During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for prospective students and school counselors to connect with college admission representatives in meaningful ways. In a typical year, NACAC hosts in-person college fairs all over the country to facilitate that process, providing important opportunities for one-on-one conversations. In order to maintain that service to both students and colleges during a time when large in-person gatherings are not possible, NACAC shifted to a virtual format. Beginning in Fall 2020, NACAC has hosted a total of 13 virtual fairs, serving roughly 100,000 students. Another eight virtual fairs are planned for Fall 2021. Another way in which NACAC helps students connect with colleges is through the annual College Openings Update. Now in its 34th year, the resource provides counselors, teachers, and families with a list of colleges and universities that are still accepting applications from qualified first-year and transfer students after May 1, National College Decision Day. During a typical admission cycle, many colleges accept applications well after May 1 as a matter of policy, while others continue to have openings available due to fluctuations that occur each year in the college admission process. Pandemic-related disruptions in the admission process for Fall 2020 pushed the process of finalizing admission and enrollment decisions later for both students and colleges. As a result, the resource has

Guest Perspective: Angel B. Pérez

been in particularly high demand. The 2020 list included almost 800 colleges, and NACAC released the list before May 1 for the first-time in its history.

NACAC's role in the admissions eco-system continues to have significant impacts, and we are determined to support the professionals doing this important work in schools and campuses during a time of enormous change. Our commitment to advocacy, education, training, the cultivation of community and coalition building is stronger than ever. We invite colleagues from all over the globe to join us in these important efforts.

NACAC

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Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color: The Importance of Academic, Transitional Adjustment, and Mental Health Supports



Authored by

Sophie W. Schuyler (*University of Massachusetts Boston*)

Jonique R. Childs (*University of Massachusetts Amherst*)

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ABSTRACT

Nearly 1 in 3 college students (30%) are first-generation students of color (FGSOC), possessing the intersectional identity of being both a first-generation college student and a racial minority. FGSOC face increased psychological and social difficulties in college when compared to students in other groups, resulting from cultural differences, lack of academic preparedness, stigma surrounding socioeconomic status, racial discrimination, and marginalization. This article summarizes peer-reviewed literature related to three types of supports that can improve the college experience and promote the academic success of FGSOC: academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. The reviewed literature is framed by a social justice perspective. Implications for future research, policy, and practice by educators, administrators, and staff working with this population of students are discussed.

Keywords: first-generation college students, students of color, academic success, mental health, supports

Approximately 56% of all college students are from families with parents or guardians who have not earned a Bachelor's or higher degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), commonly referred to as first-generation college students (Higher Education Act of 1965). First-generation college students are more likely to come from families with lower socioeconomic status (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Further, among all first-generation college students, 54% are racial/

ethnic minorities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), with Black and Latinx racial identities being the most represented (Fischer, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008). In other words, nearly 1 in 3 college students (30%) are both first-generation college students and racial minorities, possessing the intersectional identity of first-generation student(s) of color (FGSOC).

The theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) asserts that individuals experience life events and are perceived by others through the intersection of the different identities they hold (e.g., race, gender, sexual orientation). Thus, individuals and groups who possess multiple privileged identities will experience greater advantages in society, while those who possess multiple marginalized identities will experience greater disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1991). FGSOC are academically, socially, and psychologically at-risk (Gray, 2013) due to their multiple marginalized identities (low SES, person of color, first-generation college student), highlighting the need for an increased understanding of the unique challenges they face.

The influence of college-going generation status or racial identity on measures of college

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

enrollment, persistence, and academic performance) is relatively well described. For example, previous research demonstrates that compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation college students have lower college GPAs (e.g., Chen, 2005), are more likely to withdraw from or repeat college courses (e.g., Martinez et al., 2009), and are less likely to earn a college degree (e.g., Cataldi et al., 2018). Black and Latinx students also have lower college GPAs and lower college graduation rates (e.g., Bowan & Bok, 1998; Fischer, 2007; Slaughter, 2009).

Attention to the intersection between racial identity and college-going generation status on college success metrics is less voluminous, although a few studies do specifically address the experiences of FGSOC (McCoy, 2014; Tello & Lonn, 2017; Havlik et al., 2020; Dennis et al., 2005; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008; Ellis et al., 2019). Given the significance of the barriers to success experienced by first-generation college students, and the percentage of first-generation college students who are in racial minority groups, the focus of the current article is to review empirical, peer reviewed research regarding three types of supports that influence FGSOC college success: academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. Building on literature regarding first-generation college students, college students of color, and FGSOC, we discuss the experiences and importance of engaging with these supports to promote success in college.

This literature review is informed and organized by the domains of social justice advocacy as outlined by the American Counseling Association: empowerment, collaboration, and action (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Using a social justice framework involves actively addressing the dynamics of power, oppression, and privilege, recognizing that people have been socially stratified and marginalized based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and other identities throughout societal history (Toporek & Daniels, 2018; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003). Further, a social justice framework involves advocating on behalf of marginalized populations to challenge the way services are provided in order to meet their unique needs (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). As such, the implications for research, policy, and practice included in this review focus on actions that institutions can take to improve the college experiences and academic outcomes of FGSOC.

Challenges Faced by FGSOC

Research focused on the first-generation aspect of the FGSOC identity indicates that first-generation college students tend to face increased psychological and social difficulties that impact academic outcomes. These challenges include having lower academic and career related goals and standards for themselves, possessing decreased critical thinking skills, and receiving less social and intellectual support (McCarron & Inkelas,

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

2006), which can negatively impact their academic preparation (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Pike & Kuh, 2005), persistence to degree completion (Burgette & Magun-Jackson, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008), and performance in their college courses (Stephens et al., 2012). The individualistic culture of U.S. universities tends to discount first-generation college students' academic achievement, as these students struggle to integrate their own cultural values with the environment of their institution (Stephens et al., 2014).

First-generation college students of lower socioeconomic status face additional barriers to success, including stigma, marginalization, and hardship that is related to their social class identities (Stephens et al., 2012). For example, first-generation college students report higher levels of classism on campus from peers, professors, and the institution as a whole than continuing generation students (Allan et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2017). Some FGSOC report feeling invalidated and embarrassed due to stereotyping and misinterpretations by instructors or peers that are linked to their socioeconomic realities (Havlik et al., 2020). Due to having limited financial resources, many FGSOC work full-time while earning their degrees and rely disproportionately on financial aid (House et al., 2019; Page & Clayton, 2016; Pratt et al., 2019). In addition, FGSOC are less likely than students from economically advantaged backgrounds to possess traditional forms of cultural capital, including the education, knowledge, and academic skills typically

associated with high achievement and social status (Bourdieu, 1986; Saunders & Serna, 2004; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Richards, 2020). As a result of these factors, FGSOC are less likely to participate in activities that lead to academic and social success, such as studying in groups, using campus support services, and interacting with faculty (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Focusing on the racial aspects of the FGSOC identity, research demonstrates that college students of color face additional barriers, including racial discrimination and racial-ethnic microaggressions (Ellis, et al., 2019; Bui, 2002; Davidson et al., 2004; Cataldi et al., 2018; Solorzano et al., 2000). These experiences can create feelings of alienation, isolation, and invisibility, and contribute to increased mental health difficulties (Cerezo et al., 2013; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Reynolds et al., 2010; Pieterse et al., 2010). They may also contribute to the lower college matriculation rates and prolonged degree completion times observed in students of color (Fischer, 2007; Museus et al., 2008; Slaughter, 2009). Discrimination and marginalization are even more pronounced for FGSOC who attend Predominately White Institutions (PWIs), resulting in a college experience that is challenging and highly stressful (McCoy, 2014; Havlik, 2020).

Supporting FGSOC

The next section of this article reviews literature that focuses on academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

health supports for FGSOC on college campuses. We focus on these three areas as they are places institutions can tangibly intervene to impact the success of FGSOC within a social justice framework. For example, college self-efficacy (the level of confidence in one's ability to effectively complete tasks related to college success; Solberg et al., 1993) has been positively linked to academic progress, college outcome expectations, the ability to cope with college related barriers, and career aspirations (Raque-Bogdan & Lucas, 2016). FGSOC have lower academic self-efficacy than white first-generation students (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008), but when colleges provide adequate academic, transitional adjustment, and mental health supports for FGSOC their self-efficacy is likely to improve (McCoy, 2014). The provision of such supports is an example of an equity-driven and socially just endeavor aimed at increasing a sense of empowerment among FGSOC.

Academic Supports

Starting in K-12 education, FGSOC are at an academic disadvantage due to systemic inequities, such as higher rates of poverty and lower quality classroom instruction (Bui, 2002; Ward et al., 2012). These disparities later result in lower college entrance exam scores and decreased academic preparedness for college (Bui, 2002). In addition, many FGSOC receive very little support from parents/guardians during the college application process (Pascarella et al., 2004), resulting in a challenging and frustrating experience

(McCoy, 2014). School counselors are therefore a crucial source of college and career information for first-generation and low-income students during the high school years (Owen et al., 2020). Once enrolled in college, FGSOC remain at a disadvantage by not being able to benefit from parental knowledge and guidance related to the college experience, such as advice related to study skills and assignments, time management, and the importance of utilizing campus resources (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Davis, 2010; Ward et al., 2012). As the number of meetings with an academic advisor increases, however, academic retention and performance improve for first-generation college students (Swecker et al., 2013). Therefore, consistent and specialized academic support from school counselors, advisors and mentors may lead to greater academic success for FGSOC.

In addition, providing information to first-generation college students about how their unique backgrounds may inform their college experiences increases their utilization of college resources (e.g., meeting with professors) and improves their academic performance (Stephens et al., 2014). Further, employing creative pedagogical approaches that emphasize multiculturalism, such as collaborative learning groups, team-based learning, and peer-instruction, can lead to more positive educational experiences for FGSOC (Jehangir, 2010; Roberson & Kleynhaus, 2020). These pedagogical approaches illustrate and emphasize the social justice advocacy principles of

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

collaboration, empowerment, and action (Toporek & Daniels, 2018), which may promote identity development and a sense of belonging for FGSOC.

Another source of potential support for FGSOC includes attending Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), which include Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs). These institutions, which are often located in urban areas of the South, Midwest, and East, provide access to postsecondary education for millions of students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students (Espinosa et al., 2017). The majority of PBIs have student bodies that are 50 to 75 percent Black, while White and Latino/a/x students are the second largest racial groups enrolled. National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data shows that these institutions can positively impact persistence and performance in college, as the overall graduation rate for students of color at MSIs is much higher than the federal graduate rate, particularly at public universities (51.5 percent vs. 16.6 percent; Espinosa et al., 2017). The success experienced by students who attend MSIs can be attributed to the creation of safe and empowering environments that recognize individual and collective achievement in numerous ways (Conrad & Gasman, 2015). Not only are faculty and administrators familiar with the unique backgrounds and academic support needs of non-traditional students, they embrace and celebrate students' diverse cultural and racial identities

(Conrad & Gasman, 2015).

Transitional Adjustment Supports

The transition to college, marked by academic and social integration into the college environment during the first year of study, plays a crucial role in the retention and achievement of all college students (Tinto, 1993). Such integration is often evidenced by living away from home, dedicating substantial amounts of time and effort to college related activities, building close relationships with college peers, fulfilling academic responsibilities, and returning to college the following year (Inkelas et al., 2007). Receiving transitional adjustment support from one's parents/guardians (i.e., encouragement and advice), college peers (i.e., affirmation and solidarity), and institutions (i.e., campus resources and programs), is an important factor in determining a successful transition to college (Ward et al., 2012), particularly for first-generation college students (Pascarella et al., 2004; Ward et al., 2012) and college students of color (Hinton, 2008; Locks et al., 2008).

Compared to continuing-generation students, first-generation college students tend to feel less supported by parents, peers, and faculty members in their college transition (Garriott et al., 2017). Further, FGSOC report lower perceived support during their college transition than white first-generation college students (McCoy, 2014; Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Due to a lack of transitional

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

adjustment supports, FGSOC often experience difficulty adapting to the college environment and feel disconnected from their institutions (Covarrubias et al., 2020; Terenzini et al., 1994). As a result, they are less likely to socialize with college peers or to participate in extracurricular activities on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994) and more likely to experience low GPAs during their first semester of college (Dennis et al., 2005). Greater support from parents/guardians or peers during the transition to college can lead to improved academic self-efficacy, greater academic satisfaction, higher college outcome expectations, and increased retention for FGSOC (Havlik et al., 2020).

Institutional supports, such as academic and social programs that provide specialized guidance and mentorship from college faculty and staff, also improve the transition to college for FGSOC (McCoy, 2014; Tello & Lonn, 2017). For example, McCoy (2014) found that FGSOC who enrolled in a summer bridge program felt much better prepared to start college. This program provided an opportunity for FGSOC to gain familiarity with the campus, connect with other students and faculty of color, and increase their confidence before the school year began. Another study discovered that FGSOC who participated in a living-learning program—a unique residential community for students with similar academic goals or shared interests—felt more integrated into their college campus than FGSOC who lived in a traditional dormitory (Inkelas et al., 2007). These findings suggest that FGSOC who

receive instrumental support from family members, peers, and institutions during the college transition feel more empowered, have greater opportunities for collaborative learning, and experience improved academic performance and adjustment to college life as a result.

Mental Health Supports

Access to emotional support is important for the well-being of college students, as the transitional nature of college and young adulthood can contribute to increased psychological difficulties, including depression, anxiety, and stress (Beiter et al., 2015; Stallman, 2010). College students of color are particularly vulnerable to the stressors of being a minority within a majority culture and the acculturation process that accompanies this experience (Mayorga et al., 2018; Sanchez et al., 2018; Reynolds et al., 2010). Acculturation, or “...the internal negotiation over the degree to which a student’s personal attitudes and behaviors conform to both the norms of the dominant culture and their culture of origin” (Mayorga et al., 2018, p. 247), can negatively impact the mental health and well-being of FGSOC. For example, FGSOC have lower self-esteem and life satisfaction and higher levels of stress than white first-generation college students (Wang & Castañeda-Sound, 2008). Further, stress related to acculturation has been found to increase symptoms of depression and anxiety in students of color, as well as decrease the ability to cope with these symptoms (Mayorga et al., 2018).

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

FGSOC may also experience racial-ethnic microaggressions, or “subtle statements and behaviors that unconsciously communicate denigrating messages to people of color” (Nadal, 2011, p. 470), which have been linked with greater psychological distress among both Latinx and Asian college students (Sanchez et al., 2018). It may feel difficult for FGSOC to speak about their experiences of discrimination or their feelings of distress and isolation (Banks, 2018; McCoy, 2014; Havlik et al., 2020). However, McCoy (2014) found that the multicultural student center on one campus was perceived as a safe space by FGSOC to be their authentic selves, voice their challenges, and build community.

Despite their potential for increased mental health issues, FGSOC are unlikely to seek psychological support through counseling centers on campus (Stebleton et al., 2014; Banks, 2018). Further, all first-generation college students are more likely than continuing-generation students to view themselves negatively if they do seek professional mental health services (Garriott et al., 2017). When counseling services are utilized by students of color experiencing race-based stressors, however, they tend to view the mental health support positively (Banks, 2018; Hook et al., 2016) and to experience

decreased psychological distress (Sanchez et al., 2018). In addition, college students who receive the amount of emotional support that they perceive themselves to need are more likely to experience a decrease in depressive symptoms than those who receive more or less support than they perceive themselves to need (Rankin et al., 2018). These findings suggest that mental health support is important for the well-being of FGSOC and that it is crucial to carefully assess the amount of support that is needed before intervening.



“Educators, researchers, school and college counselors, and mental health clinicians working in college counseling centers have an important role to play in identifying and advancing efforts to decrease racism and other forms of marginalization and oppression to improve the college experiences and outcomes for FGSOC.”

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

The purpose of this literature review was to examine three types of supports that influence the college success of FGSOC: academic supports, transitional adjustment supports, and mental health supports. When considering these supports from a social justice

perspective, it is imperative to recognize that success in college is not solely the individual student’s responsibility, but a collective social responsibility that is shared by educational institutions themselves. Educators, researchers, school and college counselors, and mental health clinicians working in college counseling centers have an important role to play in identifying and advancing efforts to decrease racism and other forms of marginalization and oppression to improve

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

the college experiences and outcomes for FGSOC. Thus, promoting success for FGSOC entails creating a smoother transition into college, increasing engagement in both academic and social activities on campus, encouraging holistic growth and development, and preparing students for a meaningful life and career after graduation (Ward et al., 2012). As noted by the research studies reviewed in this article and by Ward et al. (2012), it is important for colleges to examine their recruitment and orientation programs, learning environments, interactions between students and faculty, and their beliefs and biases about students to help FGSOC succeed on campus.

Research

Based on the research currently available and reviewed in this article, it is unclear whether or not the majority of difficulties faced by FGSOC are related to their ethnic minority identity, lower socioeconomic status, college-going generation status, or interactions among these variables. Therefore, additional research that examines how first-generation status, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status as separate and interrelated variables may impact the mental health and academic performance of FGSOC is needed. More research that examines various aspects of the college experience for FGSOC is also needed to better understand their experience on college campuses, identify strategies to reduce the occurrence of racial-ethnic microaggressions, and increase their college

self-efficacy.

Further, there is a scarcity of research that focuses on first-generation students who do graduate from college and go on to start careers (Ward et al., 2012). It is therefore recommended that future research explores the impact of services and collaborative learning environments on the career development of FGSOC, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the factors that contribute to their preparation for and experiences of post-graduation success. For example, it would be helpful to know more about the experiences of FGSOC in graduate and professional schools, as well as the steps taken by FGSOC who become faculty members. The lack of research related to FGSOC translates into a lack of guidance for institutions to follow. It would be relatively easy to remedy this lack of guidance if researchers included the FGSOC identity as another demographic variable in their analyses. By identifying effective, evidence-based interventions and policies designed to support FGSOC, opportunities to achieve socially just college and career success and to promote inclusiveness will be enhanced.

Policy and Practice

Consistent with a social justice framework, the recommendations for policy and practice included in this review focus on ways that institutions can address systemic inequities that contribute to inadequate academic, transitional adjustment, and mental health

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

supports for FGSOC. Supporting and empowering FGSOC early and often, beginning in the high school years, is likely to improve their transition to college. Increasing focused advising and mentorship for FGSOC during the first year of college may also be particularly important. It is essential that institutions, specifically PWIs, hire more faculty and staff of color and require white and nonminority faculty and staff to attend training related to cultural sensitivity, such as seminars aimed at reducing the occurrence of racial-ethnic microaggressions. Further, given the financial hardship faced by FGSOC, strategies to reduce this burden, such as tuition caps and special scholarships or grants, are needed.

Addressing mental health issues and improving overall well-being are important for all college students. For FGSOC, it is crucial for higher education institutions to not only ensure that adequate social and psychological supports are available, but to increase access to and engagement with these supports. For example, psychotherapists working on college campuses should have a presence beyond the counseling center, such as helping to develop and facilitate initiatives directed toward the psychosocial needs of FGSOC (Tello & Lonn, 2017). An example of such an initiative would be designing and testing a new support program that focuses on academic achievement and social interaction within the context of being a FGSOC (Ward et al., 2012). In addition, instructors, staff, and administrators are

encouraged to promote help-seeking to FGSOC as a form of cultural capital (Richards, 2020).

Cross-divisional collaboration is another practice that could improve the experiences of FGSOC, as the infrastructure of an institution can greatly impact student success, retention, and well-being (Ward et al., 2012). College campuses are often organized in ways that create separation between student affairs and academic affairs and between staff and faculty of different disciplines, which can inhibit the teamwork, interdisciplinary learning, support, and development of all students, and FGSOC in particular. It is crucial for institutions to better integrate campus offices and departments and to implement approaches to serving FGSOC that place equal value on intellectual and psychosocial development (Swecker, 2013). Such actions would result in increased academic and social support for FGSOC.


Further, intentional and collaborative effort by campus departments and organizations to acknowledge, embrace, and empower the different cultural traditions, values, and assets of students could lead to improved learning environments for FGSOC. Along with using collaborative learning groups, it is recommended that institutions host events and programs on campus that aim to expand our understanding of cultural capital by promoting acceptance and celebration of students' diverse identities, knowledge, skills, and achievements. Such programs could facilitate an increased sense of belonging and

Promoting Success for First-Generation Students of Color

social connectedness among FGSOC, aid in shifting the inequalities and injustices that have contributed to their challenges and advance their social mobility.

Conclusion

FGSOC represent a unique population that deserves specialized attention.

Acknowledging and addressing the specific barriers to college success that FGSOC experience is needed in order to meet their distinct support needs, given that those barriers are more numerous due to their intersecting identities. The research reviewed in this article indicates that changes in higher education practices and policies can lead to improvements in academic, transitional adjustment, and mental health supports for FGSOC. Such changes require awareness among postsecondary institutions about policies, programs, and related activities that inhibit and promote the success of FGSOC as well as a commitment to the domains of empowerment, collaboration, and action (Toporek & Daniels, 2018). Using a social justice perspective to inform the provision of programs and policies on college campuses may improve the academic persistence and overall college experience of FGSOC. 

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Student Readiness of Colleges: A Qualitative Study



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ABSTRACT

Using the framework of belonging, this qualitative study explores how one upper Midwestern college engages in student-readiness and explores the disconnects that create barriers to student-readiness. The study investigates 'student readiness' broadly through the literature and more specifically by narrowing efforts to a detailed examination of one college by conducting interviews, observations, and collecting artifacts. The results of the study revealed that the college addressed student readiness differently depending on perspectives of staff/faculty, administration, and students. Three themes emerged after coding and examination of the data: supports, community and disconnect.

Keywords: student readiness, post-secondary, perspectives, disconnect, support, community

Introduction

Colleges often focus on the concept of preparing students for college, or making them 'college ready.' In this case study (Yin, 2018) we take the opposite perspective, asking what colleges do to make themselves 'student ready,' including meeting the needs of students academically, social-emotionally, and financially. These supports are critical for increasing a student's sense of well-being and belonging on campus, which increases persistence towards academic goals and

matriculation. The study explores how one college located in a large suburb of an industrial city in a Midwestern state works to support students and the disconnects that create barriers to being 'student ready.' We conclude by offering recommendations for increasing student supports, increasing a sense of belonging, building community, and reducing disconnects.

Literature Review

The field of education has seen an increased focus on ensuring that students are college and career ready (Conley, 2014). Conley (2008, 2010, 2013, 2014) has written extensively on college and career readiness, and asserts that being college ready means ensuring students took rigorous courses and met specific metrics on standardized tests. Conley (2008) identified analysis, interpretation, precision and accuracy, problem solving, and reasoning as essential cognitive and metacognitive skills for college students. He noted that while writing is a skill closely associated with college success, students must have knowledge of the big ideas of each content area. Additionally, students must have



Student Readiness of Colleges

academic self-management behavior, including time management, effective study skills, and persistence (Conley, 2014). Lastly, contextual skills such as how to navigate college choice, admissions, and financial aid and knowledge are necessary to navigate institutional systems during the first year.

The historic and recent framing of college and career readiness focuses on the characteristics and experiences of students rather than on the role of colleges supporting and including students. The literature review examines academic, social-emotional, and financial supports related to increased student sense of well-being and belonging on campus. Framing this discussion are the ideas of the purpose of education, readiness, and belonging. In this discussion, the term “faculty” means the academic staff (teachers, instructors, professors, lecturers) of a higher education institution, while staff refers to all non-academic staff that may provide services other than teaching to students.

Making colleges student ready requires colleges cultivate a sense of belonging as a critical context for helping students navigate the social, academic, and cultural changes they experience. bell hooks (2009) described belonging as a connectedness to a place that resonates with your own history and cultural values. For a college to promote this sense of belonging, it needs to cultivate a sense of identity that students can connect with that reflects shared values and beliefs. hooks (2009) suggested that these values are

embedded in the shared history, rituals, and stories about the community and become part of the place.

“College readiness” typically focuses on academic rigor, executive functioning, and adequate financial resources (Tierney & Duncheon, 2015). For students, readiness includes additional factors such as parental support, emotional intelligence, and financial management. It is also important to recognize that the college years are when students are developing their own identity, and this identity is shaped and connected to their communities. Being a student-ready college requires “defining success as student learning” (McNair et al., 2016, p. 89) and providing academic and financial supports, but also the social-emotional supports students need to feel they belong on campus and to persist.

An important component of being student-ready is fostering a sense of belonging on campus. Research findings show how feelings of academic and social belonging, as well as commitment to the college and intention to obtain a college degree, drive student persistence (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Hausmann, et al. (2007) systematically studied students’ sense of belonging and student persistence, finding that race, gender, SAT scores, or financial difficulty were not related to sense of belonging, but peer-group interactions, interactions with faculty, and peer support were related. Students who reported more academic integration experienced an increase in sense of belonging over time (Hausmann et

Student Readiness of Colleges

al., 2007). A sense of belonging is dependent on the integration of social and academic experiences, which is promoted through supports provided to students.

Academic Supports

Academic supports have variously been defined as advising, tutoring, mentoring, and interaction with faculty (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garcia, 2019; Hausman et al., 2007; Jacobson, 2020; Moreno, 2019; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Tinto, 2003). Opportunities to discuss, work with, and engage in learning with peers in the classroom (Baleria, 2019; Brewer et al., 2018; Elffers, 2012; Engle & Tinto, 2008) and flexibility with assignments and due dates (Schademan & Thompson, 2016) have also been defined as academic supports. Learning communities have also been identified as a form of academic support (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These academic supports are provided through both formal structures, such as academic advising and faculty office hours, and informal structures such as peer relationships in class and programs of study.

Social-Emotional Supports

Social-emotional supports play a significant role in students' sense of well-being and belonging on campus. Social-emotional supports include, but are not limited to counseling services (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garcia et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019; Turkpour & Mehdinezhed, 2016), opportunities for peer interaction on campus (Baleria, 2019; Brooms, 2018; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2003), and belonging to student clubs and organizations

(Brooms, 2018; Elliot et al., 2016; Garcia et al. 2019). Participation in extracurricular activities can be a central part of students' identity development as members of the school community. Research indicates that organizations, philosophies, and practices that supported student identities contribute to a sense of well-being and belonging (Brooms, 2018; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009), as do the creation of a campus community (Baleria, 2019; Elffers et al., 2012; Elliot et al., 2016; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 2003). It is important for college students to feel they belong to a community and are supported academically, socially, and emotionally to identify with the college and persist until graduation.

Financial Supports

Financial supports for students have long been viewed as providing funding for college, particularly for low-income or first-generation college students, in the form of loans, scholarships, work-study, or grants. Research suggests that students are more likely to enroll in and successfully complete college if they have knowledge of college systems, specifically knowledge about financial aid (Cunningham, et al., 2007; De La Rosa, 2006; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn et al., 2003; Perna, 2006). Colleges must be ready to provide students with information about the admissions process and financial aid. While this information is the most critical aspect of college knowledge (Conley, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008; McNair et al., 2016; Moreno, 2019; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009), other researchers have identified additional financial supports.

Student Readiness of Colleges

McNair et al. (2016) argued that financial support for students needs to go beyond paying for tuition and should also include transportation, childcare, legal services, tax preparation services, nutrition services, and health services. Savitz-Romer et al. (2009) also argued for full-service higher education institutions that provide this broader range of financial services.

Disconnects

While colleges offer many services to support students, it is clear that there are challenges to providing and accessing the identified supports. Colleges may not be organizationally or culturally ready due to the belief that students should be college ready (McNair et al., 2016), and college faculty and students may have different concepts of support and responsibility (Schademan & Thompson, 2016; Zerquera et al., 2018). Faculty behavior played a significant role in student learning, with more experienced and full-time faculty engaging in practices most productive for student learning than part-time or less experienced faculty (Lancaster & Lundberg, 2019). Students may not have knowledge of available supports or may not be willing to use provided supports (Garcia et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

As research has shifted from focusing on college-readiness to student-readiness, it has indicated that colleges should be prepared to meet the academic and social-emotional needs of students. Doing so increases a student's

sense of belonging and well-being, allowing students to identify with the college and persist until graduation. Using the framework of belonging, this case study explores how one Midwestern college engages in student-readiness and explores the disconnects that create barriers to student-readiness.

Methodology

The faculty, staff, administration, and students of Midwest College were the focus of this research. Midwest College was selected as the research site because it reflects the growing population of students at community colleges and regional institutions. The research team consisted of five graduate students and one faculty member from the University of Michigan-Dearborn College of Education and Health and Human Services.

Case setting

The college is located in a large suburb of a major midwestern city, which is predominantly African American, while the suburb is predominantly White. The local community has a large immigrant population with a high percentage of the college age population speaking English as a second language. The student population of 12,333 students (2019-2020) is 57% White (with a majority Arab-American), 16% Black or African American, 2% Hispanic or Latino, and 3% Asian. Fifty-six percent of the students are female and 44% male, with 65% of students attending part-time. Sixty-two percent of the population speaks English as a first language. Twenty-nine percent speak Arabic, 2%

Student Readiness of Colleges

Spanish, and 1.5% Polish as their first languages. The average age of students enrolled is 24 years of age¹. Of the faculty, 176 are full-time and 489 are adjunct.

Midwest College is a community college that recently transitioned into a four-year institution. Dual enrollment high school students (16%), transfer students (4%), traditional first-time college students (21%) as well as returning adult students (57%) attend Midwest College. As a commuter school, Midwest College does not offer on campus housing. Sports, student clubs, theater, student council, co-op, and internship placement opportunities are available.

Data Collection

The research team conducted interviews, observations, and collected artifacts on Midwest College's Main Campus and North Campus from February 2020 to March 2020. The research team made seven visits to campus to make observations and conduct informal interviews. Visits were conducted both during the middle of the day and in the evening and on multiple days of the week spread over a one month period at the beginning of the winter semester. In addition, formal interviews were conducted with seven students, three faculty, and seven staff including administrators. To coordinate data collection, a data log was created to track individual team member data collection

activity. Semi-structured and unstructured interviews lasted from ten minutes to over an hour. Twelve full-time and part-time faculty members from a variety of programs were initially emailed an invitation for an interview with 10 additional faculty contacted at a later date. Three faculty members responded to the invitation. Of those three interviews, two were conducted over the telephone and one was conducted in person. Interviews with students were "person on the street interviews," with researchers interviewing students in non-academic settings in groups ranging from two to four students. All interviews were semi-structured and focused on broad themes identified by the research team prior to interviews around issues of challenges, supports, networks, and resources in transitioning to college. Guiding questions for student interviews are located in the Appendix. Interviews were left open-ended with the intention of adjusting questions to reflect the different positions held by the participants. The research team often discovered opportunities to collect artifacts during interviews. Notes were taken during the interviews on paper or in audio format and transferred to a field-notes template after the conclusion of each interview.

Data Analysis

All data was examined collectively and coded using a two-cycle process (Saldana, 2016). The first review of data used the elemental method of initial coding to obtain first impressions of the data and highlighted commonly observed ideas and characteristics.

¹ Data was retrieved from the college website and citations are not being shared to maintain college anonymity.

Student Readiness of Colleges

This process identified three distinct voices or perceptions of the data: student, staff/administration and faculty. This became important as we triangulated the data and began to look for common codes across the type of participants.

The methods used for second-cycle coding were focused, axial, and pattern. We began second-cycle coding with the focused coding method by examining the frequency of codes identified in the first cycle. The team then used axial coding to group frequent codes and narrow the number of codes by grouping similar codes. The codes identified in the first and second cycle of coding were added to a code book. Three themes were identified through first and second cycle coding: *Disconnect*, *Community*, and *Support*.

The team continuously triangulated data as it was collected and examined. For example, data collected from a student interview and a staff interview regarding the student food pantry were triangulated with collected artifacts. Interviewees were asked if they had additional information they wanted to provide, opening up dialogue opportunities. Summaries were provided to participants as a form of member checking.

Findings

Data analysis resulted in the identification of three themes:

Support, the ways that the faculty and staff at Midwest College sought to meet the needs of the students,

Community, the desire and efforts to develop a sense of togetherness among the student body, and

Disconnect, the evidence that students were often not aware or did not take advantage of support and efforts to build community.

Support

Everyone interviewed referenced efforts of the college to provide support in a variety of ways. There was a specific focus on support from faculty and staff. Students referenced faculty members who provided academic support and social-emotional support by making sure they understood course content, and facilitating social interactions and friendships in class that made the campus feel inclusive. Students were also appreciative of the support of Midwest College's counseling staff as indicated in staff evaluation comments: "Dr. Brown² was very interested in helping me succeed in my program course" and "Dr. Brown was very empathetic, kind, knowledgeable, and provided great assistance and encouragement."

² All names are pseudonyms.

Student Readiness of Colleges

The college provided several academic supports, including a writing center and a learning lab. When asked what efforts to support students academically she was most proud of, Dr. Jones, an administrator, stated:

The way we get students who test into developmental classes and transition them into regular classes. I'm also proud of our Accelerated Learning Program for struggling students. Not identified as 'special' in the regular course and stay for an extra hour for additional support. I am also proud of our creative efforts in supporting the students.

Dr. Jones's perspective is aligned with research that states schools that are student-ready no longer view students as at-risk but view them as at-promise (Burke & Burke, 2005).

When an institution sees ways to help students grow and progress, rather than ways to label, they develop supports to help students gain strategies and knowledge so they are more prepared to manage their own learning (Conley, 2008).

The college also worked to provide social-emotional support. Flyers advertising mental health services, community groups, and student organizations were distributed around campus in common spaces. The

Higher Learning Commission recognized Midwest College's institutional commitment to providing these supports in the 2019 accreditation review:

This website provides students, faculty, and staff with a list of Allies who can assist them during difficult times in addition to resources related to housing, food pantries, shelters, and human services that could assist them during these difficult times... (p. 10).



"This data suggests that various stakeholders see intentional systems to provide social-emotional supports as critical to student success."

The importance of providing social-emotional support was referenced by faculty, staff, and students. This data suggests that various stakeholders see intentional systems to provide social-emotional supports as critical to student success. The emphasis placed on student support systems throughout the accreditation review report indicates an institutional commitment to

funding support programs moving forward.

In addition to academic and social-emotional support, Midwest College worked to meet the financial and basic needs of students. In an acknowledgment that financial aid is one of the most likely barriers for low-income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008), the financial aid office held regular FAFSA sessions. Counselors worked to help students navigate the institutional financial aid procedures.

Student Readiness of Colleges

Roughly two-thirds of the college's students receive federal aid, with a majority of students receiving Pell Grants. Providing support also included helping students meet basic needs like food security and housing. All of the participants mentioned the importance of the food pantry. A student worker at the food pantry said the pantry often "can't keep up with the demand" from students. Students were more likely to be food insecure if they received financial aid, were first-generation college students, lived off-campus or identified as a racial minority (El Zein, et al., 2019). The presence of the food pantry lessens anxiety in students who do not need to wonder where their next meal will come from.

Most references regarding support provided by the college focused on meeting students' basic needs, crisis care for mental health or emotional needs, or academic support. While there was talk about community, there was little evidence that any of the formal support was focused on developing a sense of belonging or an identity as a member of the Midwest College community.

Theme of Community

Midwest College serves a diverse student population, matriculating through the institution at various stages of their academic and personal lives. Midwest College is a commuter school with no residential housing, presenting challenges to community building. An additional complication to community

building is the high percentage of courses taught by part-time faculty who are not consistently on campus. The interviews with two full-time faculty revealed that they teach five to six course sections per semester and are on campus daily. Being present on campus full-time means that they are more available to meet with students and more likely to sponsor organizations on campus, an important component of establishing community and building relationships. The large number of part-time faculty also means that faculty are more transient, meaning students are less likely to have the same faculty member twice, preventing students from creating a relationship with faculty that is central to building community.

Despite these realities, efforts to develop a sense of community are ongoing. Faculty and staff who were interviewed consistently mentioned a desire to develop a sense of campus community. Full-time faculty members expressed a desire to build personal and academic relationships with their students. One professor shared, "I try to to learn about students' personal lives and challenges. I want to see each student as a human being and convey that I care about them as individuals." They stressed the importance of individualizing the learning experience and providing the academic and social-emotional support students need. Efforts to convey to students that they are cared about as individuals within the larger campus community were discussed by faculty and staff members, but were not as clearly articulated by the part-time faculty

Student Readiness of Colleges

and staff. Students also shared that fellow students worked to ensure the college was a supportive community. In response to a question about seeking help with classwork, a student replied, “You can ask another student. There is always someone around who is willing to help.” The supportiveness of the students was emphasized when a student approached a researcher sitting at a table during a campus observation, introduced herself, asked what year she was in and offered to help.

There are also non-academic facets that build communities, such as Midwest College’s offering of a variety of clubs, organizations, and intramural and school sponsored athletic teams. Staff identified between thirty and thirty-five clubs with what they believed was a high degree of participation. The college requires clubs, which are driven by student interest and not organized by the college, to have at least 10 members, but with only 30 clubs, this equates to a minimum of 300 active students out of a student body of 13,000. A staff member talked about the college’s athletic program as a source of community as well, but in 2019 there were only 91 students involved in sports teams sponsored by the college out of 13,000 students. While sports and clubs can be an important source of community and belonging, none of the eight students interviewed referred to these clubs or sports.

The data highlighting the theme of *Community* demonstrates the desire of Midwest College stakeholders to improve their campus culture

and the overall sense of community, but our research shows that there is a disconnect in the current beliefs of community between part-time and full-time faculty, staff, and students. While there is evidence of effort by the college to develop a supportive atmosphere on the campus, there is also evidence that the students are not actively participating in the formal organizations sponsored by the college.

Theme of Disconnect

While the researchers found evidence of academic, social-emotional, and financial supports for students at Midwest College, support appears to be primarily academic. Interviews with faculty and staff revealed differing philosophies relating to the amount of support the students needed. For example, where one faculty member viewed support through active engagement with their students in their learning and getting to know them as individuals; other faculty members thought students were too coddled, saying “We do a lot of hand holding here,” and would be better served by letting them figure out things on their own. Interviews revealed a difference among the perspectives of part-time or full-time faculty. Part-time faculty were less flexible with providing additional supports, while full-time faculty saw providing this support as a key component of their teaching responsibilities.

Counseling staff also mentioned that some faculty are more approachable and supportive of students who request accommodations

Student Readiness of Colleges

through the office of disability services. Feedback from a survey of a student who received academic support echoes this counselor's input, "She provided great feedback and recommended me with professors that I should take and also helped me schedule my next semester's classes." Counseling staff also described some students as being too dependent on their parents and staff. As evidenced by this quote from a staff member, some staff members rely on a traditional teaching style versus a teaching style that is grounded in developing a relationship between the faculty member and student:

Faculty generally have traditional approaches and views to teaching and do not attempt to learn about students personally. They teach in their lane and do not leave their box although the student population of the college is stunningly under educated.

A student's level of connection with school faculty and staff varied and was dependent on each relationship. Students felt positive about the connections with faculty and staff. This is evidenced in how students describe their relationship with some of their favorite faculty, as well as by the student surveys that provided the Assisted Learning Services department with student feedback. When asked about their connections to faculty, students cited the positive and negative aspects, for example, "I love my psych teacher. My CIS teacher knows his content but he is not engaged with us." There are

also divergent perspectives among the faculty and staff at Midwest College. Dr. Jones stated, "We are trying to dispel myths among the faculty. One of the myths we were able to debunk was that there was a disproportionate number of Midwest College students with reading difficulties. Our research proved this was not the case and we were able to share this data with the Midwest College faculty."

In addition to differences of perception among faculty and students about what supports should be provided, there also appeared to be a disconnect between the support programs provided and their utilization by students. During our observations, there were very few students at the Writing Center and Learning Lab. While most students were aware of supports on campus, some students had a limited understanding of where to go for academic or financial support. This disconnect is evident in an interview with a student activities manager, who stated students were "not really" aware of the supports on campus. Ms. Noble attributed this disconnect to communication barriers, noting that the student population at Midwest College is very diverse with different preferred modes of communication, the college has a split campus, and high school students who were enrolled in the Early College program. The two campuses are not within walking distance of each other, making transportation difficult, and some students were not aware that some services are provided on the other campus.

Student Readiness of Colleges

In an effort to reduce communication barriers with students, Midwest College recently created a Student Activities Instagram account, which has 300 followers, representing less than 3% of the student population. Despite a concerted effort from the staff and administration of Midwest College to support students and develop a sense of community on campus, there was little evidence this effort was recognized by students. No researcher observed students wearing Midwest College shirts, hats, coats or other items with the college logo, and no student referred to themselves by the name of the college mascot during our time on campus. This would suggest that the students may not feel a shared sense of identity, history, values, and purpose as members of the college community. This may be exacerbated by the large age range of students attending the college. While there is evidence that the college has invested time and resources into creating a sense of community, there is also evidence that many students do not feel a strong sense of connection to the college. Given the transient nature of the student population this is understandable, but given the importance of belonging to student success identified by Tinto (1987), the disconnect between the efforts of the college and the student body is an issue to be noted.

Discussion

In this study, it became clear through our data collected and literature that colleges that are student ready (a) work continuously to

provide a wide variety of supports and services for students, (b) develop effective systems to identify and address any disconnects within the organizational structures, especially how they may impact student success, as defined by the attainment of a degree or certificate, and (c) make a concerted effort to strengthen the students' sense of community. Midwest College offered services intended to support students, such as financial aid guidance and resources, FAFSA nights, a writing center, and a food pantry. In addition, full time faculty talked about the importance of grounding academic and social-emotional support in personal relationships. These supports are consistent with academic supports (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Garcia, 2019; Hausman et al., 2007; Jacobson, 2020; Moreno, 2019; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009; Tinto, 2003) and financial supports (Cunningham et al., 2007; De La Rosa, 2006; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Horn et al., 2003; Perna, 2006) described in the literature.

This finding of social and emotional supports leading to a feeling of community is consistent with the literature of how one feels a sense of belonging in a community (hooks, 2009). Consistent academic advising and counseling for students led to a feeling of trust in the institution; students wanted to feel that the institution cared about them as individuals. The literature suggests that student clubs and organizations foster a sense of belonging (Brooms, 2018; Savitz-Romer et al., 2009). However, the effort put in by the institution, or lack thereof, to include students in clubs, groups, or cohorts of any kind was

Student Readiness of Colleges

recognized by students and directly contributed to whether students felt a sense of belonging or not, as evidenced by our interviews.

We also found that while some students were familiar with these supports there was a disconnect and many students often did not know of these services and did not access them. This disconnect is consistent with the disconnects identified in the literature (Garcia et al., 2019; Moreno, 2019; Schademan & Thompson, 2016). Many faculty and students shared that services were often not used by students who came to campus for class and then left when class was over. In addition, part-time faculty who also came to campus just to teach one or two classes also did not invest as much time building supportive relationships with students. The findings of this study are important because they highlight the ways that disconnects undermine colleges' efforts to be student ready. Midwest College had several systems in place to provide supports for students. Most of these support systems were academic in nature. They also provided systems that support the development of students' college knowledge and there were efforts to address the students basic needs and create community. However, many of these systems were not accessed by students because of the disconnects evidenced on campus. Our research can assist post-secondary institutions in increasing the number of students who obtain degrees or certificates by considering how to best support students by carefully

considering the themes of support and community, and finding solutions to disconnects that impact students. We believe that efforts to cultivate a sense of belonging on campus is a constructive way to address the observed disconnects.

Recommendations

In order for colleges to adequately prepare to support their students, we recommend they perform a review of all supports currently offered, including academic, financial, mental health, social-emotional, and learning and study skills. This recommendation was based on the disconnect between supports offered by the college and supports students had knowledge of and used. Colleges need to view incoming applicants as whole people, not just as students, and provide support in all areas that will help a student succeed. Furthermore, colleges should provide opportunities for personalized advising. For example, financial support such as scholarships can help students pay for tuition, classes, books, and fees; however, many students lack financial management skills needed to manage money from scholarships and loans. Financial advising would help students meet their financial obligations and determine if they need to work in addition to school. This is especially important for first generation college students, who may not have assistance in navigating financial aid, classes, and degree paths. Evidence to support this recommendation was found in student interviews, when students acknowledged the supports provided by the

Student Readiness of Colleges

institution but admitted to a lack of knowledge in how to navigate the process and take advantage of the supports. It is also recommended that the college focus on multiple avenues of communication for students to learn about opportunities and programs for support. Using faculty, social clubs, peer advisors, and social media in addition to traditional communication methods could increase awareness and participation in these support programs. Evidence for this recommendation was based on interviews with students that revealed a lack of awareness of supports offered by the college.

Lastly, the issue of disconnect between what is offered by the college and what is known and used by students could be addressed by focusing on cultivating students' sense of belonging. This is most effectively done by focusing on personal relationships. This is evidenced in the comments by students who felt a connection with an individual faculty member, staff, or fellow student. Building and maintaining these relationships takes time and energy, and colleges need to prioritize this work. Interviews with faculty and staff suggested that full-time faculty had a greater willingness to build and maintain relationships with students.

Conclusion

Additional questions arose during our research that could be addressed in future data collection and research, such as how


different groups at these institutions would define student readiness. How do different stakeholders (faculty, students, administration) define a successful student at their institution? Why are full-time faculty perceived as more supportive than part-time faculty? Would implementing a faculty mentoring program support part-time faculty in building relationships with students? Are the supports provided by the institution accessible and sufficient for students? Do students feel supported and set up for success by the institution? What are opportunities for growth and improvement among institutions to ensure they are ready to support their students within the community, lift their voices, and use feedback to continually grow and change with the incoming student population? Based on the observation of a lack of campus identity, further research could be conducted relating to the role of branding, school pride, shared history, and a sense of belonging among students as a way to facilitate addressing disconnects. Our research into student readiness presented multiple paths for future research to support students, post-secondary institutions, and even the concepts of readiness and success in a post-secondary academic career.

The study did not include alumni, students who dropped or transferred out of the college, students who were not on campus at the time of visits, or any specific targeting of distinct departments or areas of the college. Furthermore, during the twelve weeks of our research, both the institution of the researchers and the college we were studying

Student Readiness of Colleges

closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students, faculty, and administration had to transition to working remotely, and thus had limited accessibility. Researchers were no longer able to travel to campus to collect more data and possibly follow up with participants previously interviewed. Additionally, because of the time frame and focus of our study, we chose only to examine one post-secondary institution, instead of collecting data from many institutions. This narrowed our population, and did not allow for the comparison of data and noticing of trends between different institutions.

The findings of this study are important because they contribute to the success of post-secondary institutions, and on a larger scale, and success of students and our education system as a whole. Colleges know and are investing in providing support to incoming students, focusing primarily on financial and academic supports. We found that a sense of belonging on campus was as, if not more, important than these technical supports. This is especially true for a commuter campus like Midwest College that serves primarily first generation college students. We found that students who had a sense of belonging were more likely to access existing supports and that faculty who were more connected to the campus worked harder to build supporting relationships that cultivate a sense of belonging. We hope our research can assist post-secondary institutions in considering how to best support their students by carefully considering the themes of support

and community, and finding solutions to disconnects that impact students within the organization. 

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Student Readiness of Colleges

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Student Readiness of Colleges

APPENDIX

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Hello, I am _____, a graduate student at University of Michigan-Dearborn, and I am conducting a qualitative research study for a class. We are asking the question, “What do colleges do to make themselves student ready?” Do you have a few minutes to talk about what it’s been like starting here as a student?

You can remain anonymous if you wish, and if you decide you don’t want me to include your thoughts I will not use them.

What was your experience in your transitioning to college? Or what’s it been like starting here as a student? What challenges have you experienced since you’ve been a student at this institution? What has gone well in coming to school here?

What advice would you have for a new student?

What university provided supports/resources have you found here? How aware are you of these supports and resources offered on campus? What is your access to these resources? Are you aware of [these other resources] that are offered here?

What informal networks of support have you found here? How did you find these networks?

If I were to transfer to this institution and I was struggling with _____ where would I go? How would I get support?

What are your goals/plans for (after) college?

If they freeze - tailor to ‘next semester’, ‘over the summer’, ‘next year’

What role has the university played in reaching those goals?

College Access for Prospective First-generation High School Students: Parent Perceptions



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative interview study examined how parents of potential college-going first-generation students in one high school perceive and experience their access to resources and knowledge that would allow them to support their adolescents' successful entrance into postsecondary institutions. The study found that the parents believe that high schools will help their children with college but that they underutilize the resources available and lack important social capital needed to help their students succeed.

Keywords: college access, first generation, parent perspectives, high school, social capital, education

Research continues to show the long-term financial benefit of obtaining a college education, whether it is a 2-year associate degree or a 4-year bachelor's degree (Abel & Deitz, 2014). Data collected between 1970 and 2013 has shown that people obtaining a bachelor's degree earn, on average, 56% more than people obtaining only a high school diploma. Likewise, people earning an associate degree will earn 21% more than people with a high school diploma (Abel & Dietz, 2014).

The social and economic mobility that a college education can offer is a core motivation for first-generation (FG) college students who enroll in and complete college (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). However, FG

students are less likely to obtain a college degree than their peers who have parents or family members that have obtained a college degree (Tym, Mcmillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004). One reason for this disparity may be FG students' limited access to nonacademic knowledge regarding college enrollment. Growing evidence demonstrates that there is more to college readiness than academics, and importantly, a key source of that information for successful students is parents. Researchers have found that families of FG students generally lack needed knowledge to access college institutions, yet parental influence has been identified as a critical factor in whether a student obtains a postsecondary education (Chlup et al., 2018; Holcomb-McCoy, 2018).

Literature on the challenges faced by FG students often characterizes students and their parents from a deficit perspective, which does not lead to adequate approaches for addressing the problem (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018). For example, these students are usually described as unprepared academically and as not understanding the culture and processes of college (Thayer, 2000). Parents of FG students are viewed by educational



Parent Perceptions

practitioners as disengaged from their children's education (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018; Land & Ziomek-Daigle, 2013) and as not possessing the knowledge or experience about going to college that would enable them to guide their children (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018; Thayer, 2000). Instead of blaming students and their parents, research suggests that to address these obstacles more fully, schools need to understand better their responsibility in the distribution of this knowledge (Chlup et al., 2018; Holcomb-McCoy, 2018).

The problem of lack of college access for FG students can be viewed through a social capital lens. Bourdieu's social capital theory focuses on how people gain access to or are restricted from beneficial economic and institutional resources through their membership to social networks, such as family (Bourdieu, 1986). Using the lens of social capital theory this study examined how parents of potential college-going FG students perceive and experience their access to the valuable resources and knowledge that would allow them to support their adolescent's successful entrance into postsecondary institutions. This understanding can then be used by schools to build upon those supports and opportunities for the benefit of FG families. Prior research on first-generation college students covers a wide range of academic and social factors that have been found to impact FG students, but little research has focused on parent perceptions.

Background Literature

FG students are less likely to enroll in college and less successful than other students once they get there. Research has found that between 54% and 58% of FG students enroll in college immediately after high school, while 82% of students whose parents obtained a bachelor's degree enroll in college immediately after high school (Land & Ziomek-Daigle, 2013; Mead, 2018). In college, FG students are more likely to take remedial courses and perceive themselves as less academically prepared, especially in areas related to math and science (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014).

Family influence is one of the strongest predictors of a student obtaining a college degree (Chlup et al., 2018; Bui & Rush, 2016; Holcomb-McCoy, 2018), and a critical factor impacting whether an FG student persists in college is the level of social support they receive from family and peers (Gibbons & Woodside, 2014). One study found that parental encouragement of their student to take algebra was a predictor of students taking advanced mathematics in high school and enrolling in a university, and FG students were less likely than those whose parents had a college degree to receive such encouragement (Horn & Nunez, 2000). Other research shows that FG students not only receive less support from family for attending college but also knew less about college when compared to second-generation students (Tym et al., 2004; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991).

Parent Perceptions

Parental support also impacts whether or not a student applies to college.

Only 65.6 percent of students who are from the lowest SES and are also academically qualified applied for college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2002). This rate is 22% lower than similar students from higher SES backgrounds (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2002). Choy found among 1992 high school graduates that were considered “college qualified,” FG students reported that they received less support from their parents in the task of applying for college. The level of support increases as parents’ level of education increases (Choy, 2001). However, FG college enrollment rates increase if their parents have received guidance about the processes of completing college entrance and financial applications (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006).

Another barrier for FG students is lack of knowledge about financial assistance for attending college. For example, FG students are less likely to have family members who know that waivers exist to pay for the ACT or SAT and are less likely to complete the Free Application for Federal Students Aid (FAFSA) because of uncertainty about their or other family members’ status as an immigrant, or because their parents are fearful of being audited by the IRS or ashamed of their financial position (Mead, 2018). Additionally, FG and low-income families often have misconceptions about paying for college leading to the tendency of FG students and their families to overestimate the cost of

college and underestimate the amount of financial aid available to them (Velez & Horn, 2018).

In a report discussing debt aversion as a barrier to college access, one study found there is a perception held by low-income students that financial aid loans are not really a form of financial assistance (Burdman, 2005). Choy (2004) explained that the benefits of a college education may not always outweigh the financial cost because accumulated debt can be a huge risk as economic conditions or the inability to find a job can jeopardize timely payment of student loan debt. The fear of the crippling and life-altering debt student loans create is well founded. Friedman (2019) found that college graduates in the year 2017 owe an average of \$28,650 in student loans. Coupled with fears of being academically incapable of completing college, college becomes a risk deemed too large to take (Choy, 2004).

While secondary schools have a significant role in the distribution of college access knowledge, they struggle to effectively disperse this knowledge to FG students. FG students are more likely to go to college if their parents have received help and information regarding college admission processes (Engle et al., 2006). For example, Chlup et al. (2018) examined perceptions of Latino parents with children who would be the first to go to college in their families, focusing on their experiences working with their children’s schools. They found that schools may believe that they are reaching

Parent Perceptions

parents, but they are not. Second, parents that participated in this study perceived that their language and cultural backgrounds were underutilized and undervalued by the school. Third, parents felt uncomfortable with the school system (Chlup et al., 2018).

Other research on the role of secondary schools in providing information about college enrollment demonstrated how school guidance counselors pose barriers to providing college access knowledge to students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018). While school counselors largely felt that it is their responsibility to work with low-income and minority families in the area of college processes, their actual efforts in organizing such activities have been found lacking (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018). School guidance counselors may see low-income and minority students as incapable of excelling in college, so these students are steered towards vocational programs, towards less rigorous pathways, and towards 2-year institutions rather than 4-year institutions. Counselors may perceive that 2-year institutions are less expensive, although financial aid may be more accessible at a 4-year institution (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018).

Methodology

This ethnographic study used qualitative research methods to explore the perceptions and experiences that parents of first-generation students have in regard to accessing resources to help their children

successfully enroll in post-secondary education. This research method uses inquiry to explore the perspectives of these participants and thus create an understanding that may inspire change (Glesne, 2016). This study explored the following research question:

What are the perceptions and experiences of the parents of potential first-generation college students at one high school in working with their child's school in areas of applying for financial aid and college entrance?

Participants

Participants in this study were 11 parents of current high school students selected from a large Southern Illinois suburban high school situated in a mid-sized city. All participants' highest level of education is high school. Participants included 5 fathers (2 Black, 3 White) and six mothers (3 Black, 3 White) as shown in Table 1. The participants were intentionally selected in order to proportionately represent the racial composition of the high school. This high school had a student racial composition of 46.3% White, 40.1% Black, 7.6% Bi-racial, 4.7% Hispanic, and 1.1% Asian. Additionally, the school had 44.5% low-income students, identified by eligibility to receive free or reduced lunch, live in substitute care, or receive public aid (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019).

Parent Perceptions

Table 1.
Participant Demographics.

Pseudonym	Relationship	Race	Education Level
Charles	Father	White	High School
Charmaine	Mother	Black	High School
Erica	Mother	White	High School
Jimmy	Father	White	High School
Kim	Mother	White	High School
Max	Father	White	High School
Ralph	Father	Black	High School
Regina	Mother	White	High School
Shelia	Mother	Black	High School
Steve	Father	Black	High School
Tonya	Mother	Black	High School

Data Source

Semi-structured interviews were conducted for this study. All participants were interviewed by the researcher. Each of the 11 participants was individually interviewed one time using the same set of open-ended questions (Appendix A). Interview questions aimed to find out parents' perceptions and experiences of accessing process information about enrolling in college; more specifically, questions explored how these parents perceive and experience institutions that hold such information. Interviews took place in August through November of 2019, in the researcher's administrative office at the school. The length of each interview was approximately 45-60 minutes, and audio of the interview was recorded for transcription.

Procedures

Pilot interview procedures.

After approval from the Institutional Review Board, two pilot semi-structured interviews were conducted using a created set of questions. The interviews were with two parents who did not go to college. These pilot interviews allowed the researcher to practice interview skills and make necessary

changes to the questions. This helped increase clarity and to make sure the questions serve the purpose of the study. Further, after each interview, interviewees were asked for feedback regarding the format of the questions. The researcher was interested to know how the questions made the interviewees feel, as it is essential to this study that questions are not belittling, interrogative, or condescending in nature. Interviewees for this piloting were parents who have children who attend the selected high school and who are already known not to have ever gone to college. Pilot interviews took place in the first two weeks of July; and were approximately 45 minutes long and audio recorded.

Study interview procedures.

After necessary revisions to this study's piloted interview questions, the researcher identified potential participants by providing a letter to parents at the beginning of the year Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) AVID parent night. This letter

Parent Perceptions

requested parents who qualify for this study to complete contact and demographic information and return the letter to a box. This letter also contained information regarding the incentive for participation, which was a \$25 gift card usable at a local gas station. Participants (11) were then selected and contacted to set up interview times during the month of August. This method of soliciting participation yielded only two participants. As a result, the remaining nine participants were contacted through referrals from other participants. All interviews were held confidentially in the school's administrative offices, were audio-recorded, and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Prior to the start of the interview, interviewees were provided another copy of the recruitment form. At this time, interviewees were provided time to ask any questions they had about the interview procedures. Then participants were verbally told that they had an opportunity to review the transcription of the interview when complete.

Data Analysis

Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data for this study (Glesne, 2016). Each interview transcription was read once to increase the researcher's familiarity with each interview. Then, each transcription was read line by line a second time, stopping to annotate using the lens of social capital theory (Glesne, 2016). Once all transcriptions were annotated with the researcher's thoughts, a third reading of the

transcripts was conducted. During the third reading, six transcriptions were open-coded. The open codes were narrowed down to a set of 26 focused codes. After a set of focused codes was created, the transcriptions were re-read, focus coded, and annotated. When all transcriptions were focus-coded, the focused codes were narrowed to derive a final set of critical themes.

In order to increase the trustworthiness and credibility of the data analysis, the researcher conducted a data analysis triangulation by having participants conduct a review (Patton, 2015). This method allowed the researcher to evaluate the accuracy and fairness of the data analysis. To achieve this, 3 participants were randomly selected to review a description of the findings from their individual interviews. Participants were asked if the description aligned with what the participant believed they said in the interview (Patton, 2015). The results of these reviews by participants are reported in the limitations section of this study. Also, throughout the entire process, the researcher used a running list of notes regarding the design of this study; any identified flaws in this study's design are included in the limitations section of this report (Patton, 2015).

Findings

The parents of potential FG college students in the study fear costs and saw grants and scholarships as a primary way to finance college.

Parent Perceptions

Financing college was a common topic for all parents. When talking directly about paying for college, three parents discussed either an effort or a hope for their child to receive some type of scholarship for college. For example, Regina stated, “That’s why I wanted her to get in band and get good at it and participate, get some scholarships, help mom out a little bit. Anything she can do to get scholarships, every little bit helps.” Other parents discussed how they saw their income level as a way to access grants. Erica talked about her hopes for her son to get financial aid in the form of grants by saying, “I’m hoping that there ... I mean, just based on our income, I’m hoping that there’s aid. I know there are grants.” Ralph, when asked if he saw financial aid as something that his son will need, replied, “I believe that it will to a certain extent, but I know what we need to mainly focus on is grants.” Several financial alternatives to grants and scholarships were mentioned by fathers such as using their G.I. bill or considering army enrollment for their child.

Three parents discussed how scholarships or grants will affect their child’s college choice. Kim best summarized this idea when she talked about her son’s selection for college. She described how her son really wanted to attend St. Louis University until she saw how much it costs. She then stated, “he only got a half ride there, which was really not much.” Kim’s son ultimately chose another college that provided a “full ride.” Similarly, Ralph shared this same sentiment “I think that attributes to a lot of the problems that are

going on now, and then you hear about how millennials aren’t buying homes, having kids, and this and that and it’s like, well, of course, they’re not. They’ve been saddled with essentially a mortgage since they got out of college.”

Debt was a concern, and four parents alluded to trade schools as a way to avoid college debt. Regina discussed how she is “investing in her [daughter] now to try to get scholarships to help out.” Regina then described her fears of “...\$200,000 of debt staring her in the face,” when she graduates. She described the influence this would have on her ultimate choice when she related a conversation she had with her daughter, “So that’s why I said, is it a university, or is it a technical school?” Max stated, “I don’t think trade schools are pushed enough... You can make an honest, decent living doing that, without \$100,000 in student debt probably.” The parents of potential FG college students perceive the school’s role and responsibility to be limited to academic preparation, high school course selection, and guidance upon request.

Parents felt that their child’s school was generally doing what it needed to do to help their child prepare for and enroll in college. Of the 11 parents, five of them talked about how they felt either the school was doing an excellent job of helping their child prepare for college and/or enroll in college or assumed that the school was available for help if they needed it. For example, when Kim was asked about what she thought the school could help

Parent Perceptions

her with, she replied, “I really don’t know, I believe if a child wants to talk about it that there’s always somebody there to talk to them. I don’t know what else you guys can do to push it.” Erica replied similarly with, “I don’t think so.” She then went on to explain, “The high school’s job, to me, is getting him to graduation and then give us a little pointer on what I can do to take him to the next level, but I don’t feel that they are responsible for it too.” Steve stated, “Just keep her focused on going to school. As long as she’s got good teachers that’s helping her and keeping her focused and disciplining her when it’s necessary, that a big help in going to college.” Parents of FG students felt it was important for the school to make sure that their high school course selection was correct. Max stated it this way, “Just making sure that he’s on the right path, that he’s picking what he wants to do and taking the right classes and keeping up”. Sheila made the suggestion that the high school can help parents by helping students put together a “game plan” by “making sure that they’re taking the right courses.” Jimmy shared this same idea by suggesting that the high school discuss his son’s plans by asking him specific questions, much like he experienced when he was in high school. Jimmy felt that the school should also help the student assess strengths to determine a postsecondary plan then “...This is the path that will get you to that next step if you’re looking to do this.”

The parents of potential FG college students perceive a lack of communication from the school about accessing college. Participants were asked to discuss information received from the school about applying for financial aid and for college. The vast majority of participants (9 of 11) indicated they had not received any information. Some participants explained that while they have not received any information regarding college enrollment, they believed that the school would either eventually provide that information or that they can contact the school to get the information. For example, Tonya stated, “Yeah, they’re going to give me that information, I believe. I think they’ll talk to me about that if I come and talk to them.” Finally, fathers had the perception that the school was sending information regarding college enrollment, but it was only being sent to their child’s mother. For example, Ralph explained that he is dependent on his wife to share with him information that comes from the school. Steve stated that he has not heard of any information from the school about college enrollment but believes the school has communicated with his daughter’s mom. Jimmy also discussed how he believes that his son’s mother might be receiving the information, but he is not.

The parents of potential FG college students get information from family and the internet and lack awareness of other resources.

Six interviewees talked about getting information about college access through a family member or relative. Max would consult “His godmother, who’s a teacher. My

Parent Perceptions

sister is a college graduate.” Jimmy and Steve both explicitly stated their sisters would be a resource for this information. Steve said, “Like I said, my sister, she had with [experience] my niece. She knows going through the processes and stuff with her.”

The internet, in some form, was mentioned as a resource by six of the participants. For example, Jimmy stated that his sister and the “high school website” were resources he could use to find information about college enrollment procedures. Other participants mentioned Google as a resource to find needed information.

Participants also acknowledged that they either do not have any resources or are unsure of what resources exist that would help them gain needed knowledge to help their child access college. For example, when asked about where he might get answers to his questions, Max shared “I really don’t know, sir...I don’t have anybody to turn to outside of the school to ask questions. I just don’t.” Steve had a similar answer when discussing what his daughter would need help doing to enroll in college. Steve stated, “...I don’t know who to talk to, who to see as far as looking into colleges and stuff like that. So, that’s kind of one of our issues. Who do we talk to?”

Discussion

Parent access to resources.

Parents viewed grants and scholarships as a resource needed to help their child access college. Here, social capital theory sheds light

on how the family structure seems to reproduce perceptions of resources, particularly knowledge of financial and informational resources related to college entrance. The resources these parents perceive they have access to include grants and scholarships, for financing college, and access to the internet and family to obtain information. But, the literature reveals that low-income families often lack the needed capital to navigate the bureaucratic process of financial aid (Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Douglas, & James, 2016), meaning that those who need the aid the most are often least likely to receive it.

The limited knowledge of available resources on the part of the participants demonstrated how the lack of social networks that disseminate college knowledge can negatively impact FG families. Support for this negative impact is found in a prior study that found that families of FG backgrounds knew less about college when compared to families of second-generation backgrounds (York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). This illustrates that the lack of awareness of valuable resources creates a clear disadvantage for FG students. The use of the internet as an informational resource is interesting in this regard as the amount of information that exists could prove to be helpful to a parent, but only if parents know what information to look for or have the experience to see beyond the face value of college marketing schemes and misleading information.

Parent Perceptions

Role of the school.

The participants believe the secondary school's role and responsibility is limited to academic preparation, high school course selection, and guidance. This theme highlights a contradiction between parent perceptions and what research indicates about what schools should be doing to teach the contextual skills and knowledge associated with college entrance. FG students are more likely to enroll in college if their parents have received information and guidance regarding college enrollment processes (Engle et al., 2006); however, Chlup et al. (2018) found that Hispanic parents perceived that schools were not making a connection with them as parents, undervalued their cultural backgrounds, and that these parents felt uncomfortable with the school system. These are clear barriers to building a relationship of shared social capital.

This discrepancy between schools and parents of FG backgrounds gives rise to two issues. First, the trust FG parents place in the school to prepare students for college entrance seems to be positive but creates a "one-way street" type of relationship. The second issue that arises is the perception of parent disengagement this conflict may create or enhance, possibly due to meritocratic

ideologies. Literature reports that often FG parents are viewed by educational practitioners as disengaged from their children's education (Holcomb-McCoy, 2018; Land & Ziomek-Daigle, 2013). This may suggest one reason why the flow of college knowledge capital fails to be shared between schools and families of FG backgrounds. However, a comparison of college planning services between more affluent districts and ones with higher low-income populations

shows noticeable disparities in the amount of college counseling expertise, focus, and resources students and families are provided. This comparison was easily done by the researcher using a website review of a High School known to be situated in an affluent area. The disparity of college planning resources is clear when comparing the two schools. The comparison school, Prairie High School

(pseudonym), has a college and career counseling department staffed with 3 counselors while the research site school does not have a dedicated department (Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2021). Prairie High School has 4 counselors, in addition to the college and career counseling department, serving 1,346 students, while the research site has 6 counselors for 2,392 students (Illinois State Board of Education, 2019; Missouri Department of Elementary & Secondary



“The trust FG [first generation] parents place in the school to prepare students for college entrance seems to be positive but creates a ‘one-way street’ type of relationship.”

Parent Perceptions

Education, 2021). This demonstrates how the emphasis on sharing this capital within this more affluent social network, and the lack of emphasis in other social networks, creates social and economic disparities.

Parents' experiences working with their child's high school in areas of applying for financial aid and college entrance are limited. Parents of potential FG college students in the study perceive a lack of communication from the school about accessing college. When looking at this communication breakdown through a social capital theory lens, it is clear that this school is failing to distribute its knowledge regarding college enrollment procedures. This is in alignment with research indicating that schools may believe they are reaching parents, but in actuality, they are not (Chlup et al., 2018). Engaging FG fathers in this relationship is important as prior research by Gibbons and Woodside (2014) found that college expectations of fathers of FG children have a substantial impact on their children's decision to enroll in college. This evidence further magnifies the breakdown in the sharing of college knowledge capital, suggesting that schools are not effective distributors of such capital to families of FG backgrounds.

Overall, parent perceptions of access are not in alignment with research on college access for FG students. The parents in this study generally felt that they had access to all the resources they would need to help their child access college and perceived that the school is

a resource for information if they need it, but also acknowledge that they have not received information from the school. While these parents had positive perceptions of the school, this study made it clear that the school is not reaching these parents. Participants indicated a strong desire for their children to go to college, and they felt they could go to the school for guidance in this endeavor. Schools need to recognize this desire and capitalize on these positive perceptions by working to ensure that they are effectively providing FG parents with all the guidance they need. If schools understand these parents' perceptions, coupled with the barriers they face, a new perspective emerges. This perspective challenges stereotypes of FG families being uninterested in their children's education. Instead, it demonstrates that schools are disengaged with FG families. With this new perspective, schools can begin the work of engaging FG families break college entrance barriers.

Implications

Improving the college enrollment and completion rates of students with FG backgrounds is a critical social justice issue. A good starting point in addressing these social and economic disparities is to examine how social capital that schools possess has failed to be effectively distributed to students and families from FG backgrounds.

One implication is that further research about FG parents' perceptions of financing college needs to be conducted. This study found that

Parent Perceptions

FG parents aspire for their children to gain scholarships and grants, yet they fail to mention student loans as a viable means to finance college. While avoiding student loan debt can be smart financially, the lack of knowledge parents have in this area needs more attention from researchers. How much do FG parents really know about acquiring either a scholarship or a grant for their child? Do FG families avoid loans because they are aware of how smart it is to avoid loan debt, or are there other underlying reasons, as Mead (2018), Velez and Horn (2018) suggest? Reasons such as not knowing or understanding the true cost of going to college or are FG families afraid of exposing their financial information through the FAFSA process. Do FG parents know that completing the FAFSA typically results in access to grants, work-study programs, and different types of student loans, subsidized or unsubsidized?

A second implication for future research pertains to the engagement of FG parents in activities that increase college awareness. Future research should examine how schools can engage FG parents in college awareness activities more effectively, possibly exploring more effective methods of communication and implementing resources. Additionally, future research could examine how to engage FG fathers in college awareness activities, since college attendance can be increased by engaging fathers. Further research also needs to be conducted on school personnel's perceptions and practices of preparing FG

students for successful college enrollment. This research could shed light on why there seems to be a breakdown in the distribution of social capital from schools to FG families. This study also has implications for policy and practice. It is evident that FG families have limited capital that would grant them an equal opportunity to access a college education. Policymakers continue to force schools to focus on academic preparation for college, but as stated before, the non-academic skills and knowledge associated with college preparation needs to become a predominant part of schools' mandated curriculum and support services. This should include funds to employ specialized counselors and implement programs like AVID, where a priority of the program is to engage students and families, especially FG families, in college awareness activities. Additionally, policymakers need to rework the financial aid process and increase the amount of the aid available. Studies demonstrate that on average a Pell grant only pays for 33% of college costs. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2016) stated that low-income families would need to spend as much as 75% of their annual income to pay for their child's college costs. Further, legislatures need to revisit the initial intent of the Pell grant, which was to increase college opportunities for low-income families to improve employment rates as a way to promote social mobility (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016). However, with Pell grants covering less and less of the cost of college, FG students are still facing more out-of-pocket costs, which does not alleviate the struggles associated with being poor and

Parent Perceptions

pursuing a college degree.

Further, this study has major implications for K-12 educational practitioners. This study extends prior evidence that schools are not effectively distributing college knowledge capital. The most alarming result of this study is that FG parents reported not receiving any college enrollment information from the school, yet they also report that the school is doing a great job preparing their children for college. Practitioners need to understand how their own perceptions of how they distribute this capital to parents negatively impact students. Understanding the magnitude of this impact should force educational practitioners to evaluate the methods they are using to reach FG parents with this critical information. In this effort, education practitioners should be mindful of their position and experience as holders of college degrees and reflect how this position may lead to the failure to effectively distribute this capital to FG parents.

Limitations

The researcher's position as an administrator at the school and is a college graduate limits this study. The researcher's position was known and could have brought apprehension to participants. This topic appeared to be sensitive to the interviewees, as there seemed to be an element of embarrassment and caution in their demeanor and responses. These feelings may have kept participants from being more open and truthful during the


interview, possibly due to feelings of embarrassment or to avoid the perception of being a disengaged parent. Evidence of this could exist in their responses to how well the school was doing to prepare their child for college or by responses that ended with the parent questioning what they said. A suggestion for future practice would be to conduct the interviews away from the school's campus.

As a part of this study's effort to increase the quality and credibility of the data analyses, three participants were randomly selected to review the findings from their individual interview transcripts. These three participants were Erica, Charmaine, and Jimmy. Erica felt that the findings from her interview were consistent with answers to the interview questions. Erica did add that she felt it was more of her son's responsibility, rather than the school's, to get into college because it is a part of growing up and maturing. This statement provided an extension to the finding by providing reasoning for Erica's perception but does not alter the analyses. Charmaine felt that the findings were accurate in representing her perceptions. She added that she felt that participating in the interview made her think more about what she can do to assist her daughter in preparing for college. Jimmy also felt that the analysis of his interview was consistent with his perceptions and experiences regarding helping his son access college. Jimmy added that he felt the interview made him more aware of how much he would need to rely on other resources such as the school, friends, and

Parent Perceptions

family to help him make sure his son is prepared to enter college successfully. In all, these three participants thought that the findings from their individual interviews were consistent with their thoughts and experiences, providing evidence that the described findings are creditable.

Conclusion

The findings of this study extend the literature surrounding the college enrollment disparity between FG students and non-FG students and conclude that educational policymakers and practitioners need to reexamine not only their efforts in remedying this disparity but also how they perceive parents of FG students. The literature and findings bring to light the critical role schools play in sharing this college access knowledge with FG families and the social responsibility they have in equalizing the college entrance playing field. If schools focus on understanding the perceptions of FG parents and use this new knowledge to find ways to engage effectively with FG families, schools can increase the rate in which FG students successfully access college. 

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Parent Perceptions

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APPENDIX

Tell me about a favorite memory or story of your kid.

Tell me more about your kid.

Prompts, if needed: Tell me about their strengths? What are their main interests in and outside of school? How has their high school experience been?

What are X's post grad plans at the moment?

How do you feel about these? What do you think are factors that led to these plans?

What are your wishes for X after high school?

What kinds of factors have led you to these wishes/hopes/plans for X?

To what extent are you and your child in agreement about post high school plans? Tell me about this.

If warranted/appropriate: What do you think X is likely to do after she/he graduates? To what extent, if at all, have you and X talked about college? Tell me about these conversations?

A. Questions if college seems to be the plan or a potential plan.

Where is your child in terms of the college process?

What actions have you and/or your child taken related to college?

What do you think still needs to be done?

What do you see as your role in the college process for your child?

If appropriate: what challenges have you encountered with this?

What challenges do you foresee as the process moves along?

What kinds of questions do you have about the college issue at this point?

What have you done in terms of getting answers to questions thus far?

What challenges has X encountered in the college process this far.

What challenges do you foresee for X in the future?

Parent Perceptions

How ready is your child to go to college? Academically? Socially? Emotionally?

What do you think your child will need help doing in order to enroll in college?

What, if anything, has your child's school done to help your child learn college enrollment procedures?

What would you expect the school to help with?

What do you want from the school that you have not yet gotten?

Tell me about the extent of communication the school has had with you about college enrollment information.

Describe the type of information you have received about paying for college.

To what extent has this information been helpful to you and your child?

Describe the type of information you have received about applying for colleges?

To what extent has this information been helpful to you and your child?

What suggestions would you make to help your child's school be more helpful?

What other resources, other than your child's school, have been available to you?

What information, if any, do you need more information about?

How would you prefer to get this information?

B. Questions if parent answer does not state college as a hope or aspiration.

To what extent have you thought about the possibility of your child going to college?

Imagine if your child told you one day that they want to go to college; how would you respond?

How would you feel?

What would your opinion be?

What questions or fears would you have?

What would be your next actions once you receive this news?

Parent Perceptions

To what extent do you believe that your child would be ready to go to college?

Academically; socially; emotionally?

What do you think your child would need help doing in order to enroll in college?

What would you expect the school to help with?

What would your role be? What might be challenges in this role for you?

What would you want the school to do?

How has your child's school helped your child learn college enrollment procedures?

Tell me about the extent of communication the school has had with you about college enrollment information.

Describe the type of information you have received about paying for college.

To what extent has this information been helpful to you and your child?

Describe the type of information you have received about applying for colleges?

To what extent has this information been helpful to you and your child?

What other resources regarding college enrollment, other than your child's school, have been available to you?

What topics, if any, do you need more information about?

How would you prefer to get this information?