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First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Pre-College Students' Expectations and Perceptions about attending College

Dr. Terence Hicks

Each year, 63% of all high school graduates attend higher education institutions with the intent of obtaining the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to enter careers to allow them to become contributing, self-supporting, and satisfied members of society (Mortenson, 1995). Many who matriculate do not graduate despite apparently adequate preparation to succeed. Mortenson indicated that of those who enrolled in college, under half completed a bachelor's degree by the time they were 29 years of age.

Students who are the first in their family to enter college (first-generation students) differ in significant ways from students whose parents have a 4-year or higher degree (non-first-generation students). Researchers (Billson & Brooks-Terry, 1982; 1987; Brooks-Terry, 1988; Christie & Dinham, 1991; London, 1989; McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker, 1991; Noel et al., 1985; Tinto, 1985; 1988; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991) have identified differences in family support for education, academic preparation, college knowledge, career versus academic orientation, level of commitment to the role of student, and attrition rates between first generation and second generation students.

Researchers have examined two hypotheses on how first-generation status affects students. In this article, the term first-generation college student refers to a college student or college students from a family in which neither parent graduated from a 4-year college or university. The term non-first-generation college student refers to a college student or college students from a family in which at least one parent graduated from a 4-year college or university.

One general school of thinking that has been advocated is that students of college educated parents are more aware of the demands of college (Brooks-Terry, 1988; Windham, 1996; York-Bowman & Bowman, 1991) and that this knowledge of college has influenced their success. The data, however, for this argument have been inconclusive.

Hicks (2002) indicated that college instructors, counselors, academic support teams, and administrators should be aware that college students, first generation or second-generation, who perceive a positive family involvement in their college experiences are likely to possess more information about college and to be more successful in college than those who do not.

A second general school of thinking for how generational status has influenced first-

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generation college students has addressed the collegiate culture. According to this thinking, college represented a unique culture and first-generation college students faced a form of culture shock when they began their studies (London, 1989; Terenzini, Rendon, Upcraft, Millar, Allison, Gregg, & Jalomo, 1994). First-generation college students often felt generally less socially accepted (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker, 1991), and they often did not have much support from their families (Terenzini, Springer, Yaegar, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). When first generation students entered college, they often experienced conflicts in values (Brooks-Terry, 1988).

First-generation college students differ in many ways; they are less well prepared academically and psychologically for college (Riehl, 1994). They typically have lower high school GPAs (Riehl, 1994; Tulsa Junior College, 1995), lower SAT's (Riehl, 1994), and have not been a part of families who have participated in honors programs; these students are also typically aware of their academic problems (Tulsa Junior College, 1995).

Beyond academic and economic constraints, first-generation college students may be less well prepared psychologically for college. It has been reported that first-generation college students have a lower sense of self-efficacy (Hellman, 1996) and lower self-esteem (McGregor, Mayleben, Buzzanga, Davis, & Becker, 1991) than students whose parents attended college.

Hoff, Cook, and Price (1996) found that many college students in the United States today may need academic support and assistance to survive and succeed in the academically challenging environment of higher education. They also indicated that the transition from high school to college may be increasingly difficult for some students to make. These researchers also indicated that students' lack of academic preparedness for college was not a new phenomenon.

Hunt and Strumpf (1993) indicated that academic support programs have traditionally been the means through which colleges and universities have attempted to improve the study skills of their academically at-risk students, particularly as they have attempted to address problems associated with retention and graduation rates. Over the past 50 years, professionals have attempted to improve the academic performance of college students through specially designed programs and courses, such as extended freshman orientations, transition seminars, and study skills courses (Murtuza & Ketkar, 1995).

A primary objective of collegiate student success in pre-college programs and orientation programs has been to improve the overall academic, personal, and social performance of at-risk students to increase their retention and graduation rates. This objective has arisen as retention rates and graduation rates have become major concerns for colleges and universities for both the ethical obligations that institutions may feel toward their students and for the financial implications of students' failure to succeed and graduate.

Ultimately, being able to accurately predict which students are likely to experience academic, personal, and social difficulties or leave college before they graduate, would allow for interventions to be designed and implemented to help students earn satisfactory

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grades and persist until graduation. If unrealistic perceptions and expectations were found, steps could be taken to challenge students to foster attitudes conducive to earning good grades, persisting, and ultimately graduating.

Methods

The data for this study were obtained from a questionnaire administered to first-year pre-college students (N=197) who attended one of two 2001 summer programs at a 4-year public research and doctoral degree granting institution on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. The first-year pre-college students were surveyed during the first and last weeks of their summer programs. The survey contained questions regarding the student's academic, personal, and social expectations of their anticipated attendance at a university. The study included 112 first-generation and 85 non-first-generation pre-college students.

The participants were first-time pre-college freshmen who were between the ages of 17 and 19 years old, and were primarily African-American, and 51% of the sample was female. The participants attended one of two six-week summer programs, the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation Program (LSAMP) and the Preparation and Adjustment for College Entrance Program (PACE).

The instrument used as a pre and posttest in this study was the PEEK: Perceptions, Expectations, Emotions, and Knowledge about college questionnaire, which was developed by Weinstein, Palmer, and Hanson (1995). The PEEK was designed to elicit the expectations that first-year students have about their college experience. This is a 30-item Likert-type scale questionnaire that explores the expectations and beliefs about the college experience. Students use a 5-point rating scale of 1 = not at all likely, 2 = not very likely, 3 = somewhat likely, 4 = quite likely and 5 = extremely likely, to indicate the extent to which they expected to experience 30 situations or circumstances in a college setting. The PEEK instrument yields information from the three scales of Academic, Personal, and Social Expectations, each consisting of ten items (see Table 1).

The PEEK questionnaire was administered to participants enrolled in the two different summer programs. The summer program participants attended a six-week program and were housed in a residential dormitory on campus. During the welcome orientation, the pre-test of the PEEK instrument was administered to the participants, filled out and returned on the spot to the researcher. During the last week of the summer program, the PEEK post-test was again administered to the participants, filled out and returned immediately.

Results

This study focused on the differences in the perceptions and expectations concerning college between first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students who participated in summer programs. The following section examines the data that were gathered with the PEEK survey.

The between groups and summer programs analysis was a comparison of the first-

generation and non-first-generation students' responses to the PEEK instrument. This analysis determined if there were any pre-post test differences in the perceptions and expectations concerning college between first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students who participated in a six-week pre-college program.

Academic Expectations and Perceptions

The distribution of responses on the 1-to-5 Likert-type scale were similar for both first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students on the pre- and post-tests, with the exception of items 4 "*If I am having difficulty in a course, the instructor will tell me,*" 10 "*my instructors will be very concerned about how well I am doing in their courses,*" 19 "*my college instructors will teach me the study skills I need for their courses,*" and 25 "*my instructor will give me feedback*" (see Table 2). As shown in Table 2 for item 4 "*If I am having difficulty in a course, the instructor will tell me,*" more than 75% of the first-generation pre-college students responded on the pre-test that this was "somewhat", "quite", or "extremely likely" to occur.

As shown in Table 2, a similar pattern can also be seen in the distribution of responses to item 10 "*my instructors will be very concerned about how well I am doing in their courses.*" The majority of the first-generation pre-college students' pre-test responses (69.6%) were "somewhat", "quite", and "extremely likely", whereas the majority of their post-test responses (64.3%) were "not at all", "not very", and "somewhat likely." The pattern for post-test responses was similar to that of the non-first-generation pre-college students.

As seen in Table 2, item 19 "*my college instructors will teach me the study skills I need for their courses;*" the majority (53.5%) of the first-generation pre-college students pre-test responses was "quite likely" or "extremely likely." Again, their post-test response distribution was similar to that of the non-first generation pre-college students. For item 25 "*my instructor will give me feedback,*" the majority (63.5%) of the first-generation students' pre-test responses were "somewhat," "quite," or "extremely likely." Their post-test results more closely resembled those of the non-first-generation pre-college students.

Significant differences between first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students' pre-test responses were found for item 4 "*If I am having difficulty in a course, the instructor will tell me*" ($\chi^2(4, N = 196) = 9.913, p = .042$) and for item 25 "*Instructor give feedback,*" ($\chi^2(4, N = 196) = 9.787, p = .044$). Also, significant differences were identified between the two groups on both the pre-test and post-test for item 10 "*my college instructors will be concerned about how well I am doing in the course,*" (Pre: $\chi^2(4, N = 196) = 11.514, p = .021$; post: $\chi^2(4, N = 196) = 9.633, p = .047$).

Personal Expectations and Perceptions

As seen in Table 3, first-generation pre-college students showed changes in their pre- to post-responses for item 11 "*I will have to take responsibility for my own*

learning." On the pre-test, 87.4% chose "quite likely" or "extremely likely," whereas on the post-test only 73.1% responded in that manner. The "not at all likely," "not very likely," and "somewhat likely" categories all showed a slight increase for the post-test. A similar pattern exists in the responses for the non-first-generation pre-college students. As seen in Table 3, for both first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students, the post-test responses for item 26 "*I am worried that I won't make it through college;*" show an increase in the percentage of students selecting "quite likely" or "extremely likely." First-generation pre-college students' responses increased from 19.5% to 21.4% and non-first-generation pre-college students' responses increased from 14.1% to 29.3%. More students in both groups perceived that they would not make it through college at the end of the six-week summer program than at the beginning.

Social Expectations and Perceptions

As seen in Table 4, the distribution of responses were similar for first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students on the pre- and post-test. There were no significant differences between the two groups. For item 3 "*I will have to work at making new friends;*" there was a 5.3% decrease from pre- to post-test in the "quite likely" and "extremely likely" responses for the first-generation pre-college students and an 8.1% increase for the non-first-generation pre-college students for these response choices. At the beginning of the six-week summer program, non-first-generation pre-college students felt that they would not work at making new friends once they entered college. At the end of the six-week program, there was an increase in non-first-generation pre-college students who wanted to make new friends.

As seen in Table 4, a slightly different response pattern can be seen for item 12 "*most of my classmates will have values similar to mine.*" The first-generation pre-college students remained unchanged in the percent of students responding either "quite likely" or "extremely likely." The non-first-generation pre-college students had an 8.3% decrease in their responses from pre- to post-test, suggesting a shift in some students' perceptions.

In Table 4, item 18 also shows a tendency toward group differences. This item, "*In college, I will join fewer student organizations than I joined in high school,*" shows 23.1% of first-generation pre-college students responding "quite likely" or "extremely likely" on the pretest and 30.2% responding in that manner on the post-test. This also suggests a change in perception for some of these students.

Non-first-generation pre-college students had the same percentage of "quite likely" and "extremely likely" responses on the pre-test and post-test, 24.6%. Both groups demonstrated the trend of students joining fewer organizations in college than they did in high school.

Summary

The PEEK questionnaire results indicated several misperceptions that first-generation and non-first-generation college students may have about attending college.

For example, at the beginning of the six-week summer program, first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students felt that the need for outside help to do well in their course would not be needed (Table 3, item 2). However, at the end of the six-week summer programs, they tended to express the opinion that outside help would be needed confirming that often when high school students are recruited, they may not understand the rigors of academics at the university level. Leong and Bonz (1997) indicated that some students who have received academic honors in high school may have misperceptions that they can handle college level work easily, but in reality outside help is needed. While college presents many students with opportunities for academic, personal, and social growth and enhancement, some students find the demands of college adjustment exceed their coping resources (Leong & Bonz, 1997). Instead of an opportunity for growth, college becomes a source of further distress for these students. According to Leong and Bonz many of these pre-college students eventually end up needing help from college counselors and psychologists with their adjustment difficulties.

The PEEK questionnaire responses for both first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students showed possible misperceptions about instructors' teaching study skills (Table 2, item 19). Even the brightest students may have the misperception that college instructors would spend class time teaching study skills. This finding highlights the need for tutorial services if an institution is to become effective in meeting the needs of its students, it must have tutorial services in place. The tutorial programs would offer an opportunity for each student to become knowledgeable in the following areas: effective studying, test taking skills, career planning, interpersonal relationships, adjusting to and/or negotiating the university environment, utilizing campus resources to maximum advantage, and other special interest topics as determined by student interest and need.

The PEEK questionnaire results indicated that changes occurred regarding the personal category, "*responsibility for their own learning*" for the first-generation pre-college students on their pre to post responses (Table 3, item 11). More students in both groups perceived that they would be responsible for their own learning at the beginning of their summer program than at the end of the summer program. Regarding their concern about completing college, "*worried that I won't make it through college;*" Table 3, item 26, both groups showed an increase in the pre- to post-percentage of students selecting "quite" and "extremely likely" that they had concerns about completing college. More students in both groups perceived that they would not make it through college at the end of the six-week summer program than at the beginning.

The PEEK questionnaire results regarding the social expectations about attending college indicated that first-generation pre-college students showed a decrease from pre- to post- in the "quite likely" and "extremely likely" responses for working at making new friends, whereas there was an increase for the non-first-generation pre-college students for these response choices (Table 4, item 3). Students appeared to be aware that going to college means changes in their friendship patterns, and that part of the excitement of college relates to the anticipation of making new friends (Karp & Holmstrom, 1999). For most first-time first-year students, the idea of making new

friends is also filled with uncertainty. According to Karp and Holmstrom, first-year students are excited about new friends but worry about leaving their old friends. They know they need to make a social life for themselves in the new campus environment but worry that perhaps they will not.

Interestingly, at the beginning of the summer programs more first-generation and non-first-generation pre-college students felt that their relationships with their high school friends would not change than at the end of the programs. In college, young people can "start over;" they can make friends, establish intimate relationships, and develop the skills and knowledge to help become self supporting adults. "But the truth is that they are not sure they can take care of themselves or that they want to be left alone" (Bassoff 1988, p.3). Bassoff indicated that students see college as the time for discovering who they really are and who they really can become; they anticipate finding wholly new and permanent life identities during the college years. In addition, they believe that going to college provides a unique opportunity to consciously establish some new identities.

Both groups showed an interesting trend of students actually joining fewer organizations in college than they did in high school (Table 4, item 18). For first-generation pre-college students, the number of students responding "quite" or "extreme likely" on the pre-test decreased on the post-test, implying a change in perception for some of these students. This may not be a good trend for the university if this item reflects involvement with the university. This reinforces the research of Astin (1985; 1993) and Tinto (1985; 1987; 1988) that showed the need for community among college students. According to Astin (1993), the "lack of student community has stronger direct effects on student satisfaction with the overall college experience than any other environmental measure" (p. 351). Astin (1985) also indicated that the greater the involvement, the greater the learning and personal development of the students.

Tinto (1987) found that central membership in a group "results in a greater array of benefits, social and intellectual...of which may be the sense of being part of an important ethos or tradition which marks the continuing life of the institution" (p. 124). Tinto's work also illustrated that it is the small communities on campus that allow students to break the university down into more manageable parts so that social integration is readily possible.

The results of this study have relevance not only for college orientation programs but also for secondary teachers and high school counselors in their efforts to facilitate a better high school to college transition for pre-college students who may be first-generation. Students who are the first in their family to attend college may not have had any exposure to the college setting and may have unrealistic expectations and perceptions about college.

Given the academic, personal, and social needs of first-year, first-time pre-college students who may be first-generation or non-first-generation, college orientation and admissions personnel can play a pivotal role in expanding awareness at the junior and senior high school levels of the setting demands in postsecondary education. Innovative approaches such as field trips to college campuses, presentations by other first-generation college students, and collaborative planning for transition could provide

valuable opportunities to better prepare pre-college students who may be first-generation.

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TABLE 1

PEEK Items by Category

Academic Items

1. My college grades same as high school grades
4. If I am having difficulty in a course, the instructor will tell me
7. Material by instructor will repeat textbook
10. My college instructors will be very concerned about how well I am doing in their courses
13. Not have trouble in courses
16. More important to memorize material
19. My college instructors will teach me the study skills I will need for their courses
22. Frequent opportunities to talk to instructors
25. Instructors will give feedback re: assignments
28. Check to see understanding of material

Personal Items

2. I will not need any outside help to do well in my course.
5. I will know exactly how college fits into my future goals and plans.
8. It will be difficult to discipline myself to keep academic commitments, such as attending classes and being prepared for class.
11. I will have to take a lot of responsibility for my own learning.
14. There is nothing I will rather be doing than getting my college degree.
17. I will have to generate my own interest in my college courses.
20. I will sometimes feel overwhelmed by the workload.
23. I will not feel stressed in college.
26. I am worried that I won't make it through college.
29. The reading skills I developed in high school
Will be adequate for my college courses.

Social Items

3. I will have to work at making new friends
6. Relationship with family
9. Relationship with high school friends
12. Most of my classmates will have values similar to mine
15. Treated like a number, not person
18. In college, I will join fewer student organizations than I joined in high school
21. Social pressures
24. Students will have wide age range
27. Students will have many cultural backgrounds
30. Personal level with college instructors

TABLE 2

Summary of Pre and Post Academic Expectations and Perceptions by First-Generation and Non-First- Generation Status

Question	First-Generation (n=112)		Non-First-Generation (n=85)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
4. If I am having difficulty in a course, the instructor will tell me				
a. not at all likely	12.7%	18.7%	18.8%	17.6%
b. not very likely	9.8%	21.4%	18.8%	17.6%
c. somewhat likely	30.3%	27.6%	22.3%	22.3%
d. quite likely	16.9%	15.4%	23.5%	25.8%
e. extremely likely	30.3%	16.9%	16.4%	16.4%
10. My college instructors will be very concerned about how well I am doing in their courses				
a. not at all likely	11.6%	23.3%	10.5%	15.2%
b. not very likely	18.7%	16.9%	31.7%	31.7%
c. somewhat likely	31.2%	24.1%	35.2%	29.4%
d. quite likely	15.1%	23.2%	15.2%	12.9%
e. extremely likely	23.4%	12.5%	7.0%	10.5%
19. My college instructors will teach me the study skills I will need for their courses				
a. not at all likely	7.3%	18.7%	7.0%	20.0%
b. not very likely	12.5%	11.6%	18.8%	15.2%
c. somewhat likely	26.7%	29.4%	27.0%	27.0%
d. quite likely	23.2%	24.1%	24.7%	21.1%
e. extremely likely	30.3%	16.2%	22.3%	16.4%
25. Instructor give feedback; re: assignments				
a. not at all likely	22.3%	34.8%	21.1%	35.2%
b. not very likely	14.2%	20.5%	31.7%	17.6%
c. somewhat likely	28.5%	20.5%	23.5%	27.0%
d. quite likely	15.4%	15.3%	12.9%	10.5%
e. extremely likely	19.6%	8.9%	10.5%	9.4%

TABLE 3

Summary of Pre and Post Personal Expectations and Perceptions by First-generation and Non-first generation status

Question	First-Generation (n=112)		Non-first generation (n=85)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
2. No outside help to do well				
a. not at all likely	16.9%	26.7%	17.6%	18.8%
b. not very likely	18.7%	19.6%	15.2%	18.8%
c. somewhat likely	31.2%	23.2%	28.2%	31.7%
d. quite likely	11.6%	12.5%	24.7%	17.6%
e. extremely likely	21.4%	17.8%	14.1%	12.9%
11. I will have to take a lot of responsibility for my own learning.				
a. not at all likely	7.1%	15.1%	7.0%	15.2%
b. not very likely	0.8%	5.3%	5.8%	8.2%
c. somewhat likely	4.4%	6.2%	9.4%	7.0%
d. quite likely	17.8%	13.3%	20.0%	14.1%
e. extremely likely	69.6%	59.8%	57.6%	55.2%
26. I am worried that I won't make it through college.				
a. not at all likely	36.6%	32.1%	48.2%	28.2%
b. not very likely	19.6%	19.6%	17.6%	21.1%
c. somewhat likely	24.1%	26.7%	20.0%	21.1%
d. quite likely	6.2%	9.8%	9.4%	15.2%
e. extremely likely	13.3%	11.6%	4.7%	14.1%

TABLE 4

Summary of Pre and Post Social Expectations and Perceptions by First-generation and Non-first generation status

Question	First-Generation (n=112)		Non-first generation (n=85)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
3. I will have to work at making new friends.				
a. not at all likely	25.0%	27.6%	23.5%	25.8%
b. not very likely	18.7%	19.6%	22.3%	24.7%
c. somewhat likely	27.6%	28.5%	31.7%	18.8%
d. quite likely	11.6%	11.6%	14.1%	15.2%
e. extremely likely	16.9%	11.6%	8.2%	15.2%
12. Most of my classmates will have values similar to mine.				
a. not at all likely	6.2%	12.5%	9.4%	11.7%
b. not very likely	8.9%	10.7%	18.8%	20.0%
c. somewhat likely	48.2%	40.1%	43.5%	48.2%
d. quite likely	25.0%	29.4%	20.0%	16.4%
e. extremely likely	11.6%	7.1%	8.2%	3.5%
18. In college, I will join fewer student organizations than I joined in high school				
a. not at all likely	19.6%	23.2%	22.3%	20.0%
b. not very likely	25.8%	17.8%	18.8%	14.1%
c. somewhat likely	31.2%	28.5%	34.1%	41.1%
d. quite likely	13.3%	14.2%	15.2%	15.2%
e. extremely likely	9.8%	16.0%	9.4%	9.4%