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A Review on First-Generation College Students: Challenges They Face in College When Dealing With Mental Health Issues

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Abstract

This literature review investigates the challenges first-generation college students face when dealing with mental health issues in college. Four main categories are examined to demonstrate the challenges faced by first-generation college students including the status' that first-generation college students identify with, their family background and support, cultural support from their peers, and the level of knowledge they have about the college process to be successful. Future researchers could look into studying first-generation college students from different cultures and their mental health with different types of methodologies, that is later stated in the review, which can help conduct studies to help advance this area of psychological research.

Introduction

First-generation college students who mostly come from low-income families are identified as minorities, and whose parents did not pursue higher education face different challenges that make it difficult for them to get into college and be successful (Engle, 2007; Garriot & Nisle, 2018). In addition, after controlling for demographics, educational, and economic factors research has shown that first-generation college students who earn their bachelor's degree are less likely to pursue graduate school or enroll in doctoral programs due to the challenges they encounter in their undergraduate educational career (Engle, 2007). There are many factors that are shown to negatively affect these students and their motivation to seek higher education - the aim of this literature review is to highlight those specific challenges that first-generation college students face when dealing with mental health issues by examining and evaluating empirical articles. This research can help elaborate on topics in the branches of clinical and abnormal psychology by highlighting the relationships among the challenges first-generation college students face and their mental well-being when confronting them. As a young research topic in psychology, studies about first-generation college students can help many colleges be helpful and supportive towards these students that want to gain a college degree and are uninformed about how to face such challenges.

The major trends that will be presented in this review will be the first-generation college students' status that they identify with (e.g., income status, immigration status, etc.) which may become a burden or a strength for these students to thrive in college settings. Also, the student's family background whether their family origins or their educational background that

may impact their mental well-being and success in college. Additionally, the support they receive from their cultural groups and their life satisfaction when dealing with these challenges all have a relation to their mental health issues when being the first in their family to go to college. Lastly, the level of knowledge they receive about the college process and preparation can become a challenging situation because they are simply uninformed which can lead to these students having higher retention rates after their first year (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017).

Review of the Literature

This literature review identifies four broad categories that highlights recent published research on first-generation college students and the different challenges they face when they deal with mental health issues. They will be in order as status' that identify with first-generation college students, family background and social support, cultural effects and life satisfaction, and the level of knowledge about the college process and being successful. They are listed in order of importance based on the quantity of the research that was found and they highlight what types of challenges first-generation college students face.

The most common factor is a student's status, whether it's their socioeconomic status, immigration status, social status, or their status as a first-generation college student (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Although socioeconomic status may be a challenge to first-generation college students, many studies demonstrated how a student's working-class background can become a strength to help them thrive throughout their college career.

The largest number of studies demonstrated how status as a first-generation student gives students a low sense of belonging and impacts their access to coping resources in college that can help guide them to be the first in their family to obtain a bachelor's degree (Garriot & Nisle, 2018). Moreover, through a transtheoretical model and surveys, researchers discovered that because of the status' first-generation college students identify with, there is a relationship towards the level of support they receive from their school and/or family which increases their stress levels because they do not have effective ways to cope with this challenge while in college (Garriot & Nisle, 2018; Wang & Casteada-Sound, 2008). Also, the student's immigration status can play a major role in relation to the student's GPA, school success, and their depression that they are already dealing with which was discovered through online surveys that focused on their immigration status (O'Neal et al., 2016).

On the other hand, as generational status and immigration status can be a challenge, the most relevant issue that has essentially no impact on a first-generation student is their socioeconomic status which four of these studies demonstrate. In particular, researchers who conducted surveys and qualitative studies were able to conclude that first-generation college

students use their working class background and the influence from their mentors throughout their life as motivation to attend college and complete their degree at a four-year university (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Additionally, through interventions, this quasi-experiment allowed researchers to examine a student's behavioral response to stressful challenges in which most of the students that participated used their working-class background as a strength in order to help them overcome these challenges (Stephens, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015).

These different types of studies allowed researchers to gather a great amount of data but they do have their flaws because they may involve biased sampling, does not let random assignment take place in their studies, and can either be expensive or take too long to administer. The relevance of these studies show the different challenges first-generation college students face and how some challenges, such as socioeconomic status, may become a strength for students to thrive and be successful. These connections help establish the current research that has been made on a first-generation college student's different types of status' they identify with.

Along with those challenges, first-generation college students also face their family's educational background and social support they receive as a challenge as well. Family responsibilities can impact a student's academic success and their social interaction, especially with having Hispanic family origins where they receive less encouragement to pursue higher education due to their family's educational background (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). As family background can have a negative impact on the student, other studies say otherwise where family and social support are no challenge to first-generation college students, but there are other external factors that may impact them.

In a correlational two-part study, researchers examined how first-generation college students had lower interactions with their professors due to family responsibilities and can often lead to family achievement guilt for being the first in their family to pursue higher education and struggling with low grades throughout their college career (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017). Furthermore, among first-generation college female students, parental support is lower and it often has negative effects on their stress levels in their transition to college which was found through an online survey that focused on those key variables (Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011). Along with family support and its challenges it brings, friends and their social support also have negative effects that provoke PTSD symptoms, depression, and show less life satisfaction among first-generation college students among undergraduates that participated in the survey (Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durón, 2013).

In contrast, researchers discovered that first-generation college students used their own interdependent motives and mentors as motivation, and used social status as a predictor to attend college regardless of their family's educational background which was found through surveys and a

qualitative study design (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). Both of these studies show how family background and social support do not become a challenge that these students face in addition to their mental health issues, but rather interdependent motives that drive their decisions.

Most of these studies show that these connections between family support and the challenges that are faced by first-generation college students are because of family guilt and their lack of academic success. These empirical studies help current research on first-generation students and their family background by establishing the social support they lack and how it becomes a challenge when they are dealing with mental health issues. Many of these studies may have problems with self-reports since many of them were survey research designs and failed to highlight the importance of family values that deal with the importance of pursuing higher education.

Furthermore, there are also cultural factors that affect the life satisfaction of first-generation college students and appear in the midst of them dealing with mental health issues while in college. Because of these factors, many students abstain from receiving professional counseling due to self-stigma that first-generation college students face (Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Yalango, Ziemer, & Utley, 2017). Current studies have shown how first-generation college students deal with environmental factors such as social support from friend groups and academic life satisfaction challenges that they confront when dealing with mental health problems.

Specifically, unique cultural factors that first-generation college students face influence them from abstaining from psychological services because of intragroup marginalization and personal stigma that develops from the cultures they are around with (e.g. friend groups or family) and the support they receive from them also interferes with their mental well-being (Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Yalango, Ziemer, & Utley, 2017; Llamas, Morgan Consol, Hendricks, & Nguyen, 2018; Wang & Castaeda-Sound, 2008). Furthermore, a cross-sectional study was able to test Lent's (2004) social-cognitive model of normative well-being with first-generation college students through surveys that measured environmental supports and self-efficacy which found that applying this model provided insight that self-efficacy did not predict academic satisfaction and environmental supports did not predict academic progress and life satisfaction among first-generation college students (Garriott, Hudyma, Keene, & Santiago, 2015).

These studies show how cultural supports and life satisfaction among first-generation college students negatively impact the mental health issues they already deal with apart from these external challenges expressed in the empirical studies. Although not much research was found that contradict these findings, it is important to highlight that with survey studies, they were able to collect a good amount of data but may have involved biased sampling in their research. As one can see that not much research has been made on this topic, it may help to evolve this issue by looking into cultural

effects that may impact life satisfaction and mental health among first-generation college students.

Lastly, first-generation college students also deal with not having enough knowledge about college and being successful in college throughout their high school career that influences their decisions when they already face mental health problems. Even if some first-generation college students are qualified for admission, they are still less likely to enroll in college because they do not have the proper guidance due to their family backgrounds (Engle, 2007). Few studies were able to show that first-generation college students face disadvantages with obtaining the knowledge on how to get to college and the challenges they face in addition to their mental health compared to other students.

For instance, researchers that conducted a case study and a longitudinal study gathered information about first-generation college students and the disadvantages that would make it difficult for them to attend college and with less support from their families and/or high school teachers, these students would demonstrate to have less college aspirations due to the challenges they did not want to face and the lack of support from their peers and/or families (Engle, 2007; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). In addition, a survey that was conducted to compare retention rates between first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students found that first-generation college students have higher retention rates possibly due to their low-income status and/or because they are less engaged in campus activities and lack important connections to their peers (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017).

The overall methods of these studies show that through survey research, they were able to gather much information about what first-generation college students really know about college, but they may have problems of self-reports from the participants and some may have been dishonest with their responses. The connections between these studies essentially show how first-generation college students lack important information that is needed to go to college and also lack the knowledge on how to socialize with professional staff in order to succeed. These studies demonstrated that with first-generation college students being uninformed about the college process, it can become a burden when they are already dealing with mental health issues.

Conclusion

We now know that there are social, economic, and personal challenges that these students face when making the decision to attend college and be successful when they are pursuing a degree. In the cultural context, an important aspect that much of the research lacked was the idea of

homesickness in different cultures and researchers should study students in community colleges and/or graduate school as well and not just those in four-year universities. If a first-generation college student is very family oriented, being far away from their family may become a challenge for them and can discover reasons as to why some first-generation students stay close to home when choosing which college to attend. Looking into this topic can help future researchers study first-generation college students who feel homesick and how it can impact their success in college and also the struggles they face when pursuing more than just bachelor's degree in the future. These suggestions are aimed to help bridge gaps between current research that has been published and research that has not been conducted yet when researching first-generation college students that come from different family backgrounds and want to pursue higher education.

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