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Mental Health and Academic Performance of First-Generation College Students and Continuing-
Generation College Students

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Literature Review

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Abstract

In the following literature review, first-generation college students will be compared to continuing-generation college students in relation to the challenges that affect their mental health and their academic performance. Many of the studies conducted in higher education show that first-generation students are more likely to: experience symptoms of depression, higher levels of stress, lower levels of life satisfaction, and a decreased sense of belonging in higher education institutions. There can be a possible correlation between mental health and academic performance of students. While there is some research on this demographic, there is still more to be discovered about them. However, the existing literature reveals a great need for resources that help serve the needs of first-generation students.

Introduction

According to Blackwell & Pinder (2010) “Higher education is considered one of the main paths leading to opportunity, social mobility, and economic progress in the U.S.” (p.45). Students attend college to receive a degree, increase their chances of getting a career, and to further their academic goals. However, the journey towards earning a degree comes with challenges and obstacles. In recent years, researchers have publicized more information about the experiences of college students. They have found that different groups of students experience more obstacles in their college journey, including first-generation students. First-generation students have only recently been brought to the awareness of scholars. There is a lack of dialogue on these students though the existing research shows they are at a disadvantage compared to their peers. First-generation students are more likely to drop out of college or have lower GPAs than continuing-generation students. The objective of this literature review is to raise awareness on the mental health of first-generation students and examine their academic performance. There might be a relationship between the mental health of these students and their academic performance. Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora (1996) reveal that it is important to understand these students because:

As colleges and universities have become increasingly accessible to women, people of color, and students from low-income families. As a result, the profile of the undergraduate student body has changed with respect to students’ age, enrollment status, attitudes, family conditions, and physical and psychological health, as well as gender and race/ethnicity. (p.1)

Thus, it is expected for students entering higher education to grow over the next decade. Accordingly, there is a significant need to understand these students to serve their needs at institutions of higher education.

Definition for first-generation students and continuing-generation students

There are several definitions on what constitutes as a first-generation student. According to Bostic (2013) it is: “the individuals whose parents do not have a four-year degree” (p.3). This definition was adopted given it is most commonly used by higher education institutions in categorizing first-generation status. On the other hand, Bostic (2013) states that continuing-generation-students are defined as: “those whom at least one parent has a four-year degree” (p.3). The definition requires clarification because sometimes first-generation students are categorized as: individuals whose parents had *some* college experience. In this literature review, we will be looking at the former definition for simplicity. The number of first-generation college students has increased in the U.S., they take up about 21% of the student population. Students from an ethnic and low-income background are typically the first members of their families to attend a 4-year institution (Bui, 2002; Jenkins, Miyazaki & Janosik, 2009; Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). First-generation students are worth examining because they typically come from working class backgrounds and college gives them the access to gain social and economic stability.

Purpose of pursuing a higher education

As previously mentioned, a higher education increases the likelihood for individuals to access higher-paying careers and to develop their education. According to Bui (2002), first-generation students report “coming from a lower socioeconomic background and are in college to financially support their families, bring honor to their family, and gain respect/status” (p. 1).

Whereas, continuing-generation students report going to college because their parents or siblings went to college and they wanted to move out of their parent's home. Both group of students reported going to college to achieve their career goals, earn a better income, and because they refuse to work immediately after high school. The main difference between the two groups of students is that many first-generation students sacrifice their wants for the needs of their families. Because they are the first to go to college, they feel the responsibility to help their families overcome different hardships. The success of first-generation students becomes crucial because their families and communities are expecting them to reach milestones in their education and careers.

Previous research on college students and stress/academic performance

Researchers of higher education have recently begun to pay closer attention to first-generation students because there is a growing number of them at four-year institutions. The National Center for Education Statistics reported that 34% of undergraduates were first-generation students in the 2011-2012 academic year (Chen, 2005). An additional 28% of undergraduates had parents with at least some college experience but not a bachelor's degree. However, few studies have examined a holistic view of the experiences of first-generation college students. Bui (2002) claims that "minimal survey research has been conducted on the characteristics of first-generation college students at four-year institutions" (p.1). As a result, institutions of higher education may not be knowledgeable about their student population.

Also, previous research has shown that first-generation students earn lower grades compared to continuing-generation students. However, the reason is still unclear. There are still a variety of possible variables that contribute to the lower academic performance of some first-generation students.

Additionally, it is also known that they receive less social support at their universities. Social integration is one of the major challenges for first-generation students. They have a harder time navigating college life because they might have not had the resources to get familiar with it. These students may also feel inadequate or that they are not ready for college because of their educational background. Continuing-generation students are less likely to face these obstacles because of their exposure to the academic world (Katreovich & Arugete, 2017). Similarly, first-generation students face the obstacle of having to accommodate to the academic expectations of their institution. However, first-generation students are typically not exposed to the academic world by their parents and it becomes their responsibility to adapt to it. Depending on the level of preparedness given, it can be a difficult process for first-generation students to assimilate to the institution.

In this literature review I will be (a) comparing the mental health of first-generation students to continuing generation students and (b) comparing the academic performance of first-generation and continuing-generation students to explain links between mental health and academic performance.

Theoretical Framework: Mental Health

The concept of mental health can have different definitions. However, Wang & Castaneda Sound (2008) offer the following definition:

Counselors, researchers, and health providers have widely used the concept of psychological well-being to refer to one's mental health status or general psychological functioning. It is generally defined as an individual's subjective perception of her or his

psychological health or quality of life. This construct is considered multidimensional, consisting of at least two general components: cognition and affect. The cognitive component refers to the subjective evaluation of an individual's mental health. The affective component refers to an individual's experiences related to their psychological status and can be positive (happiness, elation, etc.) or negative (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress). (p.102)

While researchers have suggested for more attention on nonacademic factors and the examination of the psychological well-being of first-generation students, few empirical studies have addressed this. Therefore, little is known about the possible variables that affect the psychological well-being of first-generation students. Other studies regarding mental health have looked at the use of mental health services and the willingness of student to seek psychological help. Garriott, Raque-Bogdan, Yalango, Siemer, & Utley (2017) report that first-generation students "are not as willing to seek counseling because of attitudes and self-stigma" (p. 10). In this literature review, we will be looking at how mental health can affect the academic performance of college students. Regarding mental health, the measures that will be examined are: depression, academic acculturative stress, stress, life satisfaction, and sense of belonging.

Depression

Empirical work that addresses symptoms of depression includes the survey method by Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman (2014), which claimed that "first-generation students at large public research universities reported higher levels of depression/stress on average compared with continuing-generation students" (p. 13). In contrast, Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals & Durn (2013) found that first-generation students did not report stronger depression symptoms than continuing-generation students through the administration of the Quick Inventory of Depressive Symptoms-

Self-Report. However, they did find that first-generation women reported more depression symptoms than non-first-generation women. This reveals that first-generation are possibly at a higher disadvantage. Nevertheless, in most studies of first-generation students, comparisons between genders are not discussed or available. Regardless, there is a need to clarify the discrepancy between depression symptoms of both groups since reports illustrate opposing results.

Stress

Robotham & Julian (2006) claim that stress can be defined as the “individual’s perceptions that they do not have the resources to adapt to a circumstance from the past, present, or future. It is caused by fear, and the body’s reaction to that fear is the automatic preparation for ‘fight or flight’” (p. 108). However, the perception of a stressful situation depends on the individual. Notably, evidence exists that students do encounter some stress while other students endure significant levels of stress. It cannot be assumed that stress is always a negative experience. To clarify, there is positive stress (eustress), but also, distress which could possibly lead to negative consequences for some individuals. In recent years, there has been more interest in the experience of stress by students in higher education. It is essential to examine the amounts of stress that first-generation students and continuing-generation students face to address their issues.

With regards to stress, Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman (2014) found that “first-generation students reported feeling more stressed than continuing-generation students” (p. 13). They also found that first-generation students reported needing mental health services more than continuing-generation students. However, they did not report the reasons for which they experience more stress. A future study could help explain the reasons first-generation students experience more

stress and need mental health services. Similarly, Garriott & Nisle (2017) reported that “stress was more related to institutional resources for first-generation, but not for continuing generation students” (pg. 6). First-generation students need institutional support that can address their issues. Continuing generation students who have greater access to cultural capital may not rely as much on resources to cope with stress. Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durn (2013) reported on the PTSD symptoms of first-generation students. They found that many first-generation students experienced more symptoms than continuing-generation students. Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert (2011) reported that first-generation female college students reported higher levels of stress. Again, we see that female first-generation students are at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts. Perhaps future studies can also compare gender differences within first-generation students to see the different obstacles they may face.

Academic Acculturative Stress

All students face some sort of stress; however, first-generation students face a unique type of stress. Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durn (2013) reveal the concept of “academic acculturative stress, which is the stress that students face when entering the higher education’s academic culture” (p.130). The researchers claim that since first-generation students have not been exposed to the culture of higher education in their homes; they are not equipped to navigate college life. In addition, first-generation students are more likely to balance two different cultures. During their time in college, they balance their home culture where they interact with less educated people and the academic atmosphere that holds high expectations for them. According to Miville & Constantine (2006), students who balance the two cultures are more likely to experience more stress. Frequently, first-generation students do not have the knowledge about higher education that continuing-generation students are able to receive from their parents.

Therefore, first-generation students must acculturate to the dominant culture, which is the culture of higher education. Milville & Constantine (2006) claim “Acculturative and enculturative processes are believed to shape critical aspects of psychological functioning, including core beliefs, choice of language, attitudes, and expectations of behaviors” (p. 421). Certainly, the battles between acculturation and enculturation are often a cause of stress for students, including Mexican American college students. Therefore, stress can lead to psychological symptoms that require professional help. Balancing both cultures for students becomes a problem when they are not living up to the expectations of either culture. Students get stuck between remaining loyal to their heritage and the expectations of their university. Additionally, these students may internalize negative messages and stereotypes promoted by society and academic institutions, leading to greater emotional distress. The authors also claim that “cultural congruity conceivably might be an important predictor of mental health help-seeking attitudes and behaviors among Mexican American college students” (423). While the subjects in this study were Mexican American college students, it still helps analyze the experiences of first-generation students because many of them come from different ethnic backgrounds and learn to acculturate to the academic climate. This is a challenge that is exclusive to first-generation students because they need to learn how to balance both cultures. It could be beneficial to the field of research to see case study reports of students that face this challenge to gain a better understanding of it.

Life Satisfaction

Allan, Garriott, & Keene (2016) looked at how perception of classism plays a role in the life satisfaction of first-generation college students. They found that:

first-generation status predicted institutionalized classism and interpersonal classism.

Interpersonal classism refers to the behaviors that exclude those with lower social class

backgrounds while institutionalized classism refers to organizational structures that exclude them. They also found that some students with a lower-class background and first-generation status experienced class-based discrimination and prejudice on campus. Social class also had direct effects to life satisfaction and academic performance. (p.493)

This means that there seems to be a relationship between life satisfaction and the academic performance of students. Students who have a negative sense of life satisfaction might experience academic performance that does not exceed standards. There is not a variety of empirical work on the effects that class has on the well-being of college students. Jenkins, Belanger, Connally, Boals, & Durn (2013) gave their sample of undergraduate students the Quality of Life Enjoyment and Satisfaction Questionnaire to which first-generation students reported significantly less life satisfaction than continuing-generation students. In this study, the first-generation women scored less life satisfaction. Overall, first-generation students and the women within this demographic experience a decreased level of life satisfaction.

Sense of belonging

Stebbleton, Soria, & Huesman (2014), define sense of belonging “as the need or desire to be connected through formal and informal interactions” (p.8). The more sense of belonging a student has towards the academic and social community, the more likely they are to graduate. Sense of belonging is connected to positive mental health because students feel needed and valued in the institution. According to Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman (2014), first-generation students reported “having significantly less sense of belonging on campus than continuing generation students” (p. 13). They also found that sense of belonging is significantly related to mental health amongst students. First-generation students reported a higher frequency of reporting feeling stressed, depressed, or upset compared with non-first-generation students. The

reasons are still unclear but are in a great need of further research. The low rates of sense of belonging can help explain the retention rates of first-generation students.

Academic Performance

Academic performance refers to the self-reported perception on the overall success of students. This can include GPA and final grades to name a few measures. The mental health of students can affect their academic performance. As stated earlier, the cognition of a person also involves the affect. If we can understand the mental health of students, then we can get a better understanding of their academic performance. For example, according to Garriot & Nisle (2017), “institutional supports explained the relation between stress and perceived academic goal progress for first-generation students but not for continuing generation students” (p. 9). Clearly, the psychological well-being correlates with academic performance. In this review, GPA and scores will be reviewed to gain an understanding of the students’ academic outcomes.

GPA

According to the findings by Chen (2005) indicate that “first-generation students struggle after entering postsecondary education: completed fewer credits, took fewer academic courses, earned lower grades, needed more remedial assistance, and were more likely to withdraw from or repeat courses they attempted” (p. 9). As a result, the likelihood of attaining a B.A. was lower for first-generation students compared to their peers whose parents attended college. According to their results, first-generation students had an average GPA of 2.6, compared with an average GPA of 2.9 for students whose parents had a college degree. They also reported that “the lower performance of first-generation students was evident in subjects such as mathematics, science,

computer science, foreign language, and history” (p. 37). In this study there are no explanations given for the lower performance of first-generation students. However, it is known there are different stressors that can contribute to the lower GPAs of first-generation students. Yet, those variables have not been directly looked at in relation to their academic performance. According to Allan, Garriott, & Keene (2016), perceptions of social class influence the GPA of first-generation students, which could be due to more stress in their lives. This serves as a possible explanation for which they get lower GPAs.

Scores

A study by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora (1996) found that there is no difference in mathematical or critical thinking abilities between the two groups. However, continuing-generation students scored better in reading comprehension than first-generation students. Likewise, Penrose (2002) found that “first-generation students performed as well as the continuing generation group in the required first-semester composition course, and no difference was found in the GPAs of those who graduated four years later” (p. 452). They also found that there were no significant differences in the self-assessment of abilities in verbal and mathematical abilities. When looking at the scores of the two groups, there is evidence that they perform equally.

Summary

First-generation students reportedly experience more obstacles regarding their mental health. They experience more stress, a decreased sense of belonging, and a lower life satisfaction when compared to continuing-generation students. However, when looking at symptoms of depression, there is a discrepancy in the reports, which is unknown. First-generation students experience

academic acculturative stress which makes their experiences more difficult and unique when transitioning to the culture of higher education.

The academic performance of first-generation student compared to continuing-generation students varies. When comparing GPA, continuing-generation students report to have higher GPAs. When comparing scores, both groups reported similar results. There seems to be no difference in academic abilities.

Researchers of higher education need to examine the experiences of first-generation students more closely in relation to different factors that affect their mental health and academic performance. There needs to be more research that view their experiences holistically to understand them. The existing research shows that first-generation students are at a disadvantage when compared to their peers. When more dialogue is created about these students, the better that faculty at institutions will be able to understand them. Once they understand the students more, they will be able to address their needs.

Conclusion

The different ways in which first-generation students experience obstacles may explain why their academic performance is different from continuing-generation students. First-generation students show more signs of stress, anxiety, and less life satisfaction. As the population of first-generation students continues to grow, there is a greater demand to serve their needs. If we begin to understand these needs, then better resources can be implemented for them. Most of the articles demanded for student affairs professionals to use their data when making systems of support for students. According to Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman (2014), college counselors can play a

significant role in helping to engage and retain first-generation college students by addressing sense of belonging and mental health issues.

Horowitz (2017) suggests that “faculty members can help first-generation students by teaching them better study habits, educating them about resources available on their campus, and by encouraging them to become help seekers” (p.9). Faculty members can also listen to their stories and learn to advocate and speak up for them when the system doesn’t consider them or treat them fairly.

Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo (2015) found in their well-controlled laboratory study that brief interventions help students respond to situations in college. For first-generation students, seeing their backgrounds as a strength helps them feel more comfortable in higher education and gives them the tools they need to be successful. Changing their perceptions on their background can help first-generation students be more empowered to succeed in college.

Another possible solution that can help first-generation students are summer bridge programs.

According to Garriot & Nisle (2017), “they have shown to be successful amongst students in helping them excel academically” (p. 11). Because of these programs, students can be guided in the transition to college. In addition, Stebleton, Soria, & Huesman (2014) claims that “college counselors should partner with summer bridge programs to offer workshops on mental health issues and how to access mental health services on campus” (p. 16). The mentioned solutions could potentially help address the issues first-generation students face.

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