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A Forgotten Demographic: Low-Income First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

The focus of this Capstone is on the need for support for low-income first-generation college students. An evidence based argument is made that these students are at a major disadvantage as compared to their counterparts. Consideration of the issue, should include the perspectives of high school students who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college. Three action options emerged from the analysis of data. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what he learned to formulate an action that responded to the focus issue in a way that inspired, informed, or involved a particular audience.

Keywords: support, low-income, first-generation

Setting The Stage

When I was younger I had a bulky book that I carried around with me everywhere. Inside, was a description of nearly every dog breed known to human; its' group, size, origin, lifespan, health, temperament. I flipped through the pages of this book so regularly that the backing came undone, pages ripped and eventually it fell apart, yet I insisted I keep it. At home, my family was dealing with a lot; my parents had me at fifteen and sixteen years old. My grandma was struggling to provide for all of us and there were times when we were evicted or that I went to bed without a meal. In my school years, until reaching college, I used education as an escape from real life. I was a fat, poor, queer and socially awkward child, who desperately needed a space to feel accepted, but could not find it, so I isolated myself. It wasn't until college, when I finally turned education into a place of self-discovery, growth, and liberation.

Arriving at college was a difficult task being a first generation college student. Although, when I stepped foot on campus at California State University, Monterey Bay I quickly felt welcome and was able to easily get involved, find my voice, and dive into understanding and loving my intersecting identities, privileges, and the narratives of others.

This summer I was lucky enough to receive the opportunity to work at Northwestern University, a prestigious private university in Evanston, Illinois. At Northwestern I worked as a Residential Teaching Assistant for the Center for talent Development. The program offered gifted High School students from around the world the opportunity to take a three week accelerated college course while also receiving other life and college skills through residential programming. My role was twofold; I worked as a teaching assistant for a college course, in which I planned and led lessons, worked with small groups, graded, and led study halls. In addition, I was responsible for programming and ensuring the safety of my students in their residential experience.

One thing I noticed in my experience was that the students who attended this program came from much privilege. A majority of the students came from wealth, with both of their guardians having advanced college degrees. In addition, these students were attending mostly college preparatory high school and boarding school, which set them up with the proper education to pursue a college degree at a prestigious college university. These students lived experiences were much different than my own and different than most individuals I have gotten to know at CSU Monterey Bay. To me it was apparent that due to these students accident of birth they were granted privileges and doors were opened for them, that may never be opened for others. As a first-generation college student I can identify my own privileges, such as my race

and gender, that have played a role in my ability to succeed. Although, it is disheartening to think of all the students who lack privilege who slip through the cracks and never make it to their deserved place in higher education.

Despite seeing the effects of power and privilege in educational spaces, my experience at CSU Monterey Bay has also exposed me to many very inspiring narratives of those in oppressed groups succeeding and working towards the change they wish to see in the world. Higher education has prepared me to push myself to heights I did not previously see myself going to, in order to provide the next generation with a more equitable and loving society.

Literature, Synthesis, and Integration

Introduction

Findings have proven that access to college and university is not equitable and is an issue that must be addressed. More specifically, students who come from low-income families and will be the first in their family to apply and go to college face uniquely difficult hurdles in their journey. The term low-income refers to individuals whose family's taxable income does not surpass one-hundred-fifty percent of the poverty level amount and first-generation pertains to a college student who is the first in their immediate family to go to college (U.S Department of Education, 2017).

What is the Issue?

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce “found that sixty-three percent of all jobs will require workers with at least some postsecondary education by 2018” (Improving College Access and Completion for Low-Income and First-Generation Students, 2015, p. 4). The demand for a higher education than a high school diploma is drastically increasing, while the

struggles of low-income first-generation college students persist. In fact, conditions for low-income first-generation college students have not improved since 1970. Since 1970, the amount of low-income students pursuing higher education has only increased three percent, as compared to their counterparts at a staggering forty percent (Improving College Access and Completion for Low-Income and First-Generation Students, 2015). Students who earn an associate's degree earn twenty-seven percent more than their peers whom have high school diplomas over the course of a lifetime (Improving College Access and Completion for Low-Income and First-Generation Students, 2015). Even an associate's degree can drastically improve an individual's income across the expanse their lifetime. It is clear that the difficulty of low-income first-generation students attaining a postsecondary education is astounding and the lack of improvement over time is disheartening.

If conditions continue with the same trajectory, the gap for low-income individuals will only continue to increase. In the United States income inequality has become so pronounced that "America's top ten percent now average more than nine times as much income as the bottom ninety percent" (Income Inequality, 2015). The graph below displays the staggering difference between the top ten percent, as compared to the bottom ninety percent.

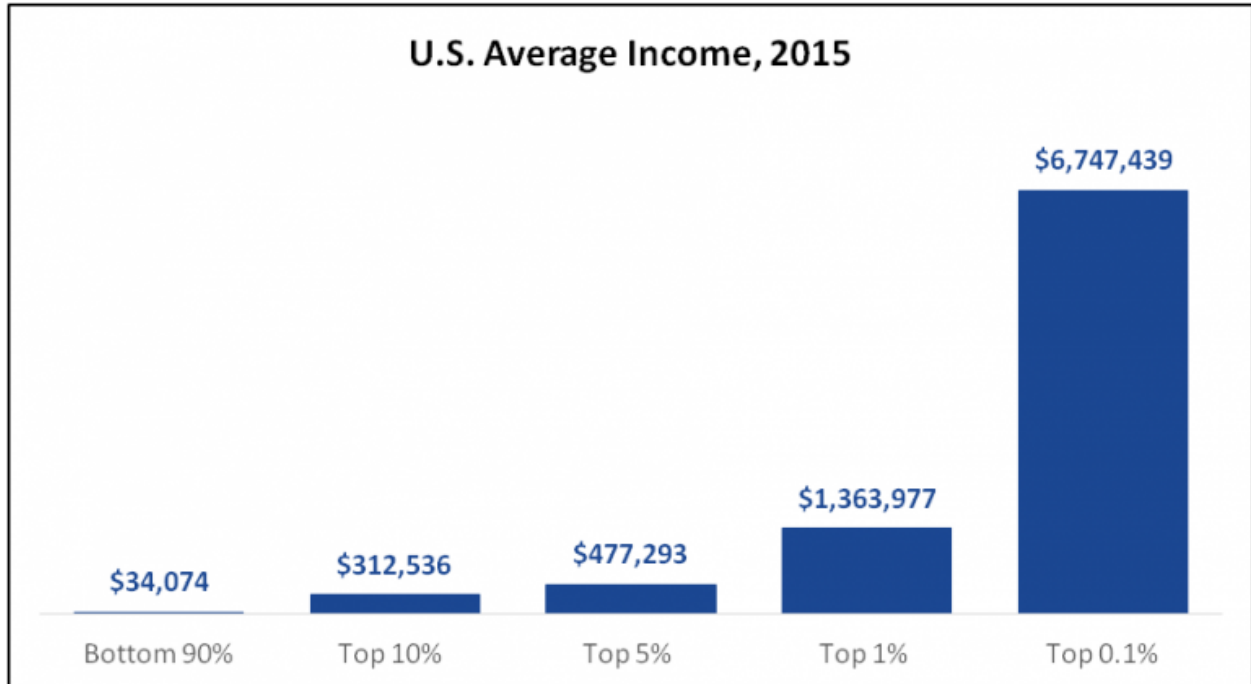


Figure 1. U.S. Average Income, 2015

It is apparent that a postsecondary education can improve one's life, yet the possibility for low-income first-generation students to do so is slim. I believe that if nothing is done, the gap between the rich and the poor will only continue. Our society will not be giving low-income individuals the basic right of an equitable opportunity of obtaining a necessary education and be perpetuating a system that oppresses low-income individuals.

Why is it an Issue?

After investigating the issue at hand, reasons for why the issue remains were identified through a careful look at the literature.

Higher costs and lack of financing. One barrier to success for first-generation low-income college students are the higher costs and lack of financing. The cost of education continues to inflate, even for low-income students. According to the States News Service "The maximum Pell Grant covered only 36 percent of the price of attendance at a public four-year

institution in 2004-05, down from 42 percent in 2001-02....And low-income, first-generation students receive only slightly more financial aid than their peers despite having greater financial need” (Improving Access and Success for First-Generation College Students, 2012,p. 1). First-generation and low-income students end up falling about \$3,600 short of the amount required to pay for college, even with loan aid (Improving Access and Success for First-Generation College Students, 2012). The financial support for college students has continued to decreased, making it even more difficult for first-generation low-income students to make the financial decision to pursue a higher education. Many low income students choose to attend community college and many also chose to attend school part time. In the end, these choices are more likely to yield students that do not complete a baccalaureate degree (At Issue: The Relationship Between Student Loans and Low-Income Students’ Baccalaureate Attainment: A Literature Review, 2014).

Insufficient academic preparation. Insufficient academic preparation is a reality for many first-generation low-income students and only serves to the issue of equitable access that these students endure. From 1999 until 2009 researchers sampled a pool of first year college students and focused on academic preparedness. Of the pool, thirty-nine percent of the students were first-generation college students. From the three types of studies the researchers used, all three results pointed to the fact that students whose guardians had gone to college were much more likely to have higher levels of academic readiness. Students who had both of their guardians attend college averaged forty-eight percent better on the SAT verbal section and thirty-eight percent better on the mathematics section. In addition, the amount of students with two college educated guardians reported receiving a B+ or higher GPA was twenty percent more

than first-generation college students (Academic Preparedness of First-Generation College Students: Different Perspectives, 2014).

What Should be Done?

The literature provided illuminated many options that would improve the success and support for low-income first-generation college students. Two major themes that were identified were improving college preparation programs and increasing sense of belonging on college campuses through support programs.

Improving college preparation programs. College preparation programs can help low-income first-generation college students feel a larger sense of support in their journey of reaching a place of higher education. There are currently programs set in place, by law, such as GEAR UP, which stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, which and AVID, which stands for Achievement Via Individual Development. GEAR UP is a federally funded program, while AVID is a program funded by the state of California. According to Tierney, author of *Increasing Access to College: Extending Possibilities For All Students*, “The vast majority of literature about college preparatory programs is no more than a decade old, and most simply tries to make sense of the...kinds of programs that exist” (2002, p. 219). Due to this lack of research on college preparation programs it makes it very difficult to discuss ways for improvement. Although, it is apparent that there is still a large difference in numbers between the amount of low-income first-generation student who attend college as compared to their counterparts (*Improving College Access and Completion for Low-Income and First-Generation Students*, 2015). Tierney also draws attention to the fact that these well-intentioned programs and states that they are “frequently underfunded and understaffed”

(2002, p. 229). I believe that some ways to improve the conditions of college preparation programs is by interviewing the main stakeholders for the program, the students. Students who are apart of these programs and who are low-income and will be the first in their family to apply and go to college are the only ones who can testify to the reality of these programs. In addition, I believe that substantial funding is necessary for the success of programs like GEAR UP and AVID.

Increasing sense of belonging on college campuses through support programs. As stated previously, since 1970, the amount of low-income students pursuing higher education has only increased three percent, as compared to their counterparts at a staggering forty percent (Improving College Access and Completion for Low-Income and First-Generation Students, 2015). With this shocking statistic it is apparent that the makeup of college campuses in today's society is a majority of individuals who are not considered low-income. With this staggering percentage of non-low-income individuals being the majority, as well as other issues these students may face such as financial and academic hurdles, it is obvious that low-income and first-generation college would feel out of place on a college campus. Therefore, it is imperative to create a sense of belonging for these students on college campuses. According to States News Service "the federally-funded Student Support Services (SSS) program, one of the federal TRIO programs, has been proven to be effective at retaining low-income first-generation students. The SSS program provides services such as instruction in basic skills, tutoring, academic advising, financial aid and career counseling, mentoring, and grant aid (2012). Low-income first generation students who take part in an SSS program are found to have higher graduation rates

than their similarly disadvantaged peers (Improving Access and Success for First-Generation College Students, 2012).

Conclusion

Low-income first-generation college students face very specific and arduous hurdles in their college experience. Codujota's theory of low-income first-generation college students illuminates the unique concerns that affect the holistic development of this student population. Two of the areas of concern for low-income first-generation college students are financial and academic concerns. Possible options for improving the conditions these students endure include improving of college preparation programs and increasing sense of belonging on college campuses through support programs.

Method

After interviewing High School students who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college and utilizing research of low-income first-generation college students, I used what I learned to improve the support for applying and feeling prepared for college. This is important because there is a lack of support before and once these students are in college.

Context

Research took place in Season¹, a coastal community in California. According to this city's website, it is home to approximately 34,182 individuals of different backgrounds. Season is comprised of 48.4% white, 43.4% Hispanic or Latino, 9.7% Asian, 8.4% African American, 1.6% Pacific Islander, and 1.1% Native American. Only 22.9% of individuals who live in Season hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Within Season there are eighteen public schools, four of

¹ Season is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of participants

which are high schools (City Demographics, 2017).

More particularly, my project took place at Seasun High School², located in Seasun, California. Presented by Ed-Data's 2015-2016 school year data, Seasun High School has 1,059 students. 69.5% of students receive free and reduced-priced meals and 16% are English learners (Ed-Data, 2016).

Participants

Participants were interviewed in two focus groups. The focus groups consisted of participants who self identified as students who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college. In addition, another characteristic the students who were interviewed shared was their identity as Latin(x).

In the first focus group there were four participants; Austin, Cardi, Yesenia, and Estella³. Austin identified as a man, while the rest identified as women. Austin, Cardi, and Stephanie were sophomores and Yesenia was a junior.

In the second focus group there were three participants who were all sophomores and all identified as women. The participants names were Helen, Veronica, and Alicia⁴.

Researcher

This concern is personally meaningful to me because I can greatly relate to it. In applying to college and in the beginning stages of college, I felt very lost and as though I had a lack of support, since I was a first generation college student. I am in my final semester of my undergraduate experience and have made my university my home by getting involved in my

² Seasun High School is a pseudonym used to protect the anonymity of participants

³ Names are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of participants

⁴ Names are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of participants

academics, career, and the community. In the future I hope to pursue a masters focused on higher education and student affairs., Therefore, this topic relates to my current and future academics. Despite my good intentions, I do hold implicit biases. Some privileges I carry are my race and ability. I believe that if I was of a marginalized race or ability my experience applying and being the first in my family to go to college would be different, therefore, throughout this project I will aim to consciously combat my biases and consider other points of view. In addition, although I grew up in poverty, by the time I reached high school and was applying to colleges my family identified as middle class. This privilege also allowed me the cushion of being able to afford applications and better understand how to apply to FAFSA, as well as other privileges I am probably unaware of.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me your thoughts about college?
2. Do you think your identities affect the way you think about college? For example, your race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, nationality, religion, etc.
3. What kind of support for applying and going to college do you have at home?
4. What kind of support for applying and going to college do you have at Seaside High School?
5. What could be done to better support high school students who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college?
6. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Procedure

Due to previous work done with Season High School teacher, Tanya Moore⁵, I reached out in order to conduct interviews. Through an online survey, students of Tanya Moore's were able to self identify by providing their name, grade, if they are planning on going to college, if they will be the first in their family to go to college, and if they would like to participate in an interview. From the survey I emailed Tanya Moore a list of the twenty-eight eligible and interested students, from which she recommended nine to interview based on who she thought would best be able to talk on the experience of being the first in their family to plan to go to college, as well as understand and possibly speak on how other parts of their identities, such as race, gender, socioeconomic status may play into their experiences.

I contacted the nine identified students and invited them to participate in an interview either on Thursday or Friday during their lunch period. From the nine I contacted, I had seven come and participate. Data was collected through two separate focus groups; one with four participants and the other with three. When students arrived I provided them with pizza for lunch and then informed them of the importance of their consent to participate. Once they all consented I read them the following script before beginning the semi-structured interview questions:

“Hello, my name is Ryan Haynes and I am a student at CSU Monterey Bay. I chose to focus my research on supporting first generation college students. When I was in High School my family was low income and I was the first to apply and go to college. When I arrived at college I realized there were many more students who were similar to me so I decided to focus my research on support for these students.

⁵ Names are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of participants

Thank you for choosing to interview. Please remember you do not have answer any question you do not want to. In addition, I will be keeping your identities anonymous in my paper. In order to accurately write about this interview I will be recording you, so please speak clearly, at a good level, and before answering a question please state your name.

I will be asking you six questions total. Due to time, I do not expect you all to answer every question, preferably we will have two to three people speak to every question. Please remember there is no right or wrong answer. Are there any questions?"

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, High School students were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve the support for students who are the first in their family to apply and go to college. This is important because it is clear that there is a lack of support for students who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college. In addition, it is evident that there is a disparity between access to higher education for first-generation low-income college students. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Figure 2). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time, probability of impact, and reach. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Evaluation of Action Options

| | | | |
|------------------------------|------|-----------------------|-------|
| Figure 2. | Time | Probability of Impact | Reach |
| Guardian Involvement | High | High | High |
| Financial Assistance | Low | High | High |
| Pre-College Support Programs | Low | High | High |

Figure 2. Evaluation of Options

Evaluation of the Action Options

Guardian Involvement. All those who were interviewed believed that their high school could better support them in their journey of being the first in their family to apply and go to college by including their guardians in the process more. The term guardian is used in order to recognize the many types of family dynamics that individuals have. A guardian is a caretaker and is legally responsible for a minor. Many students felt as though they were supported by their school in understanding the processes of applying to college, but that their guardians were often

left out of the journey. When asked what kind of guardian involvement they would like Season High School to work to including the interviewers answers varied. Many students believed that it would be important to have more opportunities for them and their guardians to work on FAFSA together with the help of their high schools' counselors and educators. Although, in addition, some students pinpointed many other factors that play into theirs and their guardian's identities. Interviewers drew attention to the current political climate in the United States. Interviewers stated that the conditions for low-income families and families of color is substandard. Students stated that their guardians were living in fear of so many things and that they wish their high school would provide more resources in helping alleviate some of this fear. Although, not directly related to these students being the first in their family to apply and go to college, they recognized that their guardians need better support and resources in order to provide them with the support they need in their journey. Research recognizes the importance of parental involvement and how it is correlated to student success. Although, research also fails to depict the experience of parental involvement from racial minorities. Ruben Anguiano states that "the relationship between minority families and educational systems has been neglected for too long." (Families and Schools: The Effect of Parental Involvement on High School Completion, 2004, p. 63). The research that has been done in order to include the narratives of minorities minority students shows that there is higher educational success, regardless of family income, when guardians are involved (Anguiano, 2004, p. 63). Through the interviews that were conducted participants emphasized the importance of including their guardians in their education. Although, much of the conversation od guardian involvement shifted to focusing on how guardians, themselves, could be better supported. Students stated that they would love their guardians to be

more involved with their process of applying and attending college, but they recognize the difficult hurdles their guardians are facing.

Financial Assistance. Many students attributed the cost of college as a big deterrent for many low-income first-generation to pursue a higher education. The interviewers indicated that they believe college has become more and more expensive over the years, while their families incomes have stayed the same or declined. Interviewers also recognized that government assistance is not enough. They referred to their friends who have had to take out loans in order to attend college. In addition, the process for applying for government assistance for higher education are difficult to understand as High School students. The interviewers recognized that they have great resources and support at Season High School, but that these resources are a privilege that many students of their same demographic do not have. The interviewers stated that their guardians are oftentimes helpless in the process of applying for government assistance, since they do not understand the process themselves. In addition, one interviewer indicated that her guardians do not speak English, and that it was difficult filling out FAFSA with them. Another student agreed and also said that her guardians' undocumented status made it nearly impossible to figure out the FAFSA process. The support for students with guardians who are undocumented or students themselves that are undocumented seemed to be lacking at Season High School. In a newspaper article Tanya Cabrera discusses the particular difficulty that students who are undocumented or students whose parents are undocumented have in applying to college, FAFSA, and other financial support programs and scholarships. Cabrera talks about how there is a common misconception that undocumented students are taking away money from those who are citizens, but this is not the reality. Undocumented students often pay out of pocket for

college because they are restricted from many aid options and because it can be difficult to properly fill out applications in which they are eligible for (Anonymous, 2017, p. 9).

Pre-College Support Programs. The students who were interviewed all belonged to some pre-college support program. Therefore, the interviewers did not identify pre-college programs to be a way to better support them. Although, it is clear that pre-college support programs are beneficial in improving access to higher education for students who are low-income and who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college. Research indicates that pre-college support programs offer a myriad of services, including “from academic preparation and information about college and financial aid, to psychosocial and behavioral supports, to the development of habits of mind including organizational skills anticipation, persistence and resiliency.” (Transitions From High School to College, 2013, p. 1). The wide scope of topics that pre-college support programs provide for low-income first-generation college students and other underrepresented groups within higher education is necessary to an inclusive and equally accessible higher education.

Conclusion. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Action Documentation and Reflection

After evaluating the action options, guardian involvement appeared to be the most viable option. Through the interviews, it was clear that support for guardians who are low income and do not have a higher education is lacking. The interviewers recognized the lived realities of themselves and their guardians, recognizing the current political climate that often leaves them in

fear. In order for guardians to better support their dependents, they must be better supported in their struggles.

Some things that interviewers specifically mentioned as being beneficial to their guardians are workshops on: FAFSA, DACA and other undocumented support services, access to food assistance programs and classes to teach English.

I set out to assist the High School I partnered with in improving their support for their students. In a letter, I recently informed the school's college and career center about my project, research, and what their students identified as the best way to improve support for them and their guardians. Although, I have just sent my letter I am hopeful for a positive response from Season High School. The high school has been continually supportive in assisting their students to making it to a place of higher education. I believe that the literature backed research as well as the student narratives will prove the validity of the importance of guardian involvement in order to better support low-income students who will be the first in their family to apply and go to college.

Critical Reflection

From this project I learned that I am able to accomplish more than I thought I was able to. While writing this paper I was also worrying about applying to graduate school, applying and interviewing for full time jobs, working, as well as struggling with personal health issues. Although at times it was difficult to manage it all, I believe I really utilized my time management and prioritizing skills in order to do the best I could.

Working Toward Change

One vital lesson I grew to understand is that more goes into working toward change than

just having an idea and implementing it. When working towards change it is necessary to rely on scholarly literature to provide research proven information, so that the work you engage in is the best way. It is also really important to collaborate with others in order to ensure that there aren't "blind spots" that one individual is missing. Most importantly, it is important to base action off of the perspectives of the stakeholders because they are the ones who are directly affected by the action taken.

Synthesis and Integration

Reflecting on my time as a Liberal Studies major and my required coursework I see that the objectives have greatly impacted my professional development. I believe that MLO two and four; diversity and multicultural scholar and social justice collaborator, fall hand in hand with one another and are very clearly addressed within the Liberal Studies Department. The many courses, especially the traditional pathway advanced inquiry courses focus greatly on diversity, multiculturalism, social justice, and inclusion in the educational context. The focus on understanding diverse perspectives and learning different ways to teach and include all students. The focus on both research as well as working towards social change through action proves that the Liberal Studies department does not only wish to "talk the talk", but also "walk the walk". The many required service learning or laboratory classes that are required allow students the ability to gain real experience working with students and implementing equitable approaches to education.

Professional Aspirations

There are many pathways I could take to become a better professional. I am unsure of if I will be attending graduate school or beginning in a full time position. Although, one thing I

know as necessary to becoming the professional I envision is focusing on continual improvement and education. In order to always grow and develop it is important to be a lifelong learner and that is one thing I have learned and one step I will take to become the professional I envision being.

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