Teaching First Generation College Students: Strategies for Supporting their Success

**Workshop for POD 2018 by**

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**Goal:** To more successfully teach and support first generation students (FGS).

**Outcomes**: By the end of this workshop, you should be able to:

* Identify the key characteristics of first generation college students (FGS)
* Describe challenges FGS typically face
* Utilize recommendations for teaching and supporting FGS

**Free Write:** *What is a first generation college student?*

**Cultural Capital:** The value and advantages students gain from their guardians that supports and assists them as they navigate the college experience and elevates capacity to fit into higher social strata (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

**Characteristics of FGS as Compared to Non-FGS**

**Personal (related to the individual student)**

* Experience Imposter Syndrome because FGS often feel different and deficient (Claude & Imes, 1978; Davis, 2010; Ewing et al., 1996; Peetet, Montgomery, & Weekes, 2015).
* Lack sense of belonging and experience challenges with socialization process (Ward, Siegel, Davenport, & Gardner, 2012).
* May experience intimidation, overwhelm, stress, decreased academic confidence, and doubts over their abilities (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Padron, 1992) which can impact performance.
* Experience guilt (Banks-Santilli, 2015; Inman & Mayes, 1999).
  + Although first-generation students aspire to go to college in order to have a better life than their parents/guardians, they also worry that they would not have had the chance to go to college if not for the hardships endured and sacrifices made by their parents/guardians.
  + Alternatively, they can feel guilty for not working and contributing to guardians’/parents’ income or not helping more with family obligations.
* Experience stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995), which is the felt risk of confirming negative stereotypes about own social group (Inzlich, 2011) in important evaluative situations (Purdie-Vaughns, 2015).
  + Can have adverse effect on student learning and comfort (Steele, 1997).
* Experience a shift in identity often leading to a sense of loss (Banks-Santilli, 2015).
* When FGS enter college, they are more often guided by interdependent models of self, which do not match the college culture of independence (Vasquez-Salgado, Greenfield, & Burgos-Cienfuegos, 2014; Phillips, Stevens, & Townsend, 2016).
  + As a result, first-generation students experience less fit than their continuing-generation student (CGS) peers.
  + Endorsement of interdependence predicts reduced sense of fit in college four years later (Phillips, Stevens, & Townsend, 2016).
* Often attend college in order to help family: 69% of FGS say they want to help their families, compared to 39% of CGS (Stephens, et al., 2012).
* Have higher levels of educational commitment, self-efficacy, academic and campus engagement than CGS but tend to lag behind them in perceptions of resilience and social comfort (Smith, 2018).

**Social, Familial, and Cultural**

* Parents/guardians were insufficiently involved in multiple aspects of the college admissions process (choice of college courses, college activities, decision to apply) (Banks-Santilli, 2015).
* High school friends/peers may be unsupportive (Inman & Mayes, 1999).
* Lack role models who went to college (Ward, Siegel, Davenport, & Gardner, 2012).
* Attend college in order to help their parents/guardians, bring honor to their family, and gain personal respect (Bui, 2002).
* See the collective value (to family, community) of earning a college degree (Banks-Santilli, 2015).
* Straddle two cultures, one at home and home community and one at college (Banks-Santilli, 2015).
  + Feel torn between school and home life which can lead to isolation.
  + FGS often experience problems “that arise from [living] simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither” (Rendon, 1992, p. 56).
* Feel disconnected or misunderstood by their families and communities (Davis, 2010).
* Limited access to knowledge of college-related cultural capital (Ward, Siegel, Davenport, & Gardner, 2012).
  + College requires a cultural journey to a very different land than the one FGS knew. Surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average (Oldfield, 2007).

**Financial**

* More likely to live off campus due to expense.
* More likely to pay for part or all of college expenses (Aspelmeier, 2012).
  + 81% express concerns about ability to pay for college.
* More likely to work which leads to less campus involvement (Ward, Siegel, Davenport, & Gardner, 2012).
* FGS who are also low-income dropped out of college at a rate **four** times their non-low-income, non-first-generation peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).
* Greater reliance on financial aid.

**Academic**

* Lack knowledge about the academic system and how it is different from high school.
* Lack academic support from home (Banks-Santilli, 2015).
* Feel like “I have to work twice as hard!” as a result of overefforting (Steele, 2010) and poor study skills.
* Have fewer interactions with faculty either in or outside of class (Kim & Sax, 2009).
* Are more likely than their continuing-education peers to attend lower performing schools and take less challenging courses while in high school (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Martinez, et al., 2009; Pascarella et al., 2004).
* Report markedly lower GPAs than CGS (Warburton et al., 2001).
* 90% of them study only by themselves (Treisman, 1992).
* Have lower college performance expectations of self (Ward, Siegel, Davenport, & Gardner, 2012).
  + They tend to underestimate what they can do.
* Are both more likely to be enrolled in remedial classes (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Horn & Bobbitt, 2000) and less likely to be enrolled in college honors programs (Pascarella et al., 2004).
  + The need for remediation is significantly linked to dropping out of college (Pulley, 2008).
* Have a stronger desire to accomplish degree goals than CGS (Smith, 2018).
* More likely to leave college after the first year than CGS (26%:7%) (Engle, et al., 2008).
  + After 6 years, only 11% FGS had earned a degree, in comparison to CGS (55%) (Engle, et al., 2008).

***21 Recommendations for Better Supporting FGS Success***

1. Ask students about learning preferences and concerns at the beginning of the semester and respond accordingly. Get to know them.

* Ideally, ask them to respond in writing.

1. Share that learning is result of hard work and persistence - not innate ability.

* Encourage a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006).

1. **Be transparent** in your expectations, assignments, grading, and teaching. Transparency promotes equity by sharing the unwritten rules of college (Berrett, 2015).

*Articulate:*

* + *What* do I want students to do?
  + *Why* do I want students to do this?
  + *How* will I assess their learning?
* Grade based on clear standards and rubrics (and provide these long BEFORE due dates).
* Have a clear course calendar with due dates so FGS can coordinate work and study schedules.

1. Help students understand the culture of your class and field.
   * Provide the big picture for them.
2. Consider briefly meeting 1-on-1 with students early in the semester to get to know a bit about them, which has proven successful in increasing retention and graduation rates (Smith, 2018).
   * This gives students an opportunity to visit a professor office and get more comfortable with you and gives you the opportunity to know your students as individuals.
3. Share your own struggles.
   * Everyone struggles or does poorly sometimes and struggle is not a sign of inability.
4. Create authentic opportunities for students to affirm individuality (Steele, 2010).
   * Encourage students to affirm personal values before assessments.
   * “For 1st-generation students, values affirmation significantly improved final course grades and retention in the 2nd course in the biology sequence, as well as overall grade point average for the semester” (Harackiewicz, et al., 2013, p. 1).
5. Respect difference.
   * Recognize the importance of family and cultural background.
   * Utilize inclusive teaching practices (see Tasha for checklist).
6. Reflect on your own positionality and the learners you tend to privilege.

* Do your own work and make changes to better meet the needs of all of your students.

1. Encourage belonging, interdependence, and cooperation.
   * Give FGS opportunities to interact with peers.
   * Encourage activities and assignments that value interdependence.
   * Encourage and help organize study groups.
   * “Representing the university culture in terms of interdependence (i.e., being part of a community) reduced this sense of difficulty and eliminated the performance gap” for FGS without adverse consequences for continuing-generation students (Stephens, et al., 2012, p. 1178).
2. Scaffold learning to offer early feedback and low-stakes assessments.
3. Consider the ways in which you give, and students receive, feedback.
   * Note existing strengths.
   * Send the message of success with effort.
   * Encourage them to give selves a fair chance at learning and growing!
   * Help students reframe challenges and setbacks as opportunities.
4. Utilize formative assessment throughout the semester.
   * This allows students to offer feedback on their learning, share challenges, and ask questions.
5. Be flexible.
   * Consider your late policies, service hours expectation, etc.
6. Promote services and support as an essential strategy for succeeding in college.
   * Not for remedial students and not a sign of weakness.
   * Help students understand their success is not obtained by individual achievement alone but by an axis of support (Gullat & Jan, 2003).
   * Include service/support information on syllabus and discuss in class.
7. Use critical compassionate pedagogy.
   * “A pedagogical commitment that allows educators to criticize institutional and classroom practices that ideologically place underserved students at disadvantaged positions, while at the same time being self-reflexive of their actions through compassion as a daily commitment” (Hao, 2011, p. 92).
8. Encourage students to take responsibility for and ownership of their own learning for meeting life goals.
   * Student motivation increases when they see connection between their classes and their life goals.
   * Encourage students to set learning goals.
9. Offer study strategies (Cox & Lemon, 2016) and encourage metacognition.
10. Advise and mentor with understanding and compassion.
11. Encourage student involvement in high impact practices, such as research, clubs, service-learning (Ward, Siegel, Davenport, & Gardner, 2012).
12. Make students aware of scholarship and internship opportunities.

Actions Steps: List 2-4 strategies you plan to utilize in future.

1.

2.

3.

4.

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I did not reach out to faculty or academic support programs in college because of my fear of revealing I was underprepared or the desire to be self-sufficient.

I was uncomfortable with the competitive and individualistic nature of the college classroom.

I did not know the basics of being a college student upon entering (e.g., office hours, buying books, adding/dropping, amount of time expected for reading/coursework outside of class).

I did not understand the ways in which college would be different from high school in terms of academic expectations.

My family framed college as either a path out of poverty (positive) or a way to get out of family obligations or work (negative).

I lacked role models who went to college.

I hid my social class background from others in college and felt like a fraud.

My parents/

guardians were intimidated by the college setting.

My way of thinking and communicating was different from others (e.g., students, faculty) on campus.

Working during college was a necessity.

I worried often about whether I would have enough money to pay for college.

I couldn’t afford to take part in extracurricular college experiences.

My parents/

guardians were not very involved in the college search and application process.

Coming into college, I had limited knowledge of “high culture,” (exposure to art, museums, high culture music such as the symphony, great works of literature, etc.).

I grew up with limited or no books (online or print) in my home.

During college, I felt like I was on the margins: I no longer fit in at home nor did I quite fit in at college.

I often felt guilty about being a college student.