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Literacy Challenges of First-Generation Collegiate Students

In the United States of America students attending a bachelor's degree program who come from families where parents or guardians have not received a bachelor's degree are commonly referred to as first generation students. These students generally make up a significant portion of the collegiate body and at Colorado State University (CSU) they represent one in four of the total student body (First Generation at CSU, 2020). This student demographic is important to research because it can describe a variety of demographic factors in society and aid researchers in understanding the best ways to reach communities that have generationally had barriers to collegiate entry. A part of this research is effective qualitative literacy: one's ability to create meaning from what they read, see, and hear based on particular demographic characteristics. Self-efficacy plays a vital role in a student's ability to perform qualitative literacy, because these behaviors are developed in a variety of manners.

The College Board of America (CBA) runs college entry exams in the United States (US) and reports first-generation students "often begin college less academically prepared from other students... tend to know the least about the price of attending college... are less likely to take college courses in academic fields such as mathematics, science and computer science..."(Kara Balemian & Jing Feng, 2013). These distinctions are important to understanding the qualitative literacy of first-generation students on the basis of how these students might interact with the educational system and perform within the collegiate system. With further analysis these observations can greatly impact the response on how best to teach first-generation students and give them the aid they require. This analysis will evaluate the demographics of first-generation students, their percentage of the student population, current programs for first-generation

students, and how these factors transform into their qualitative literacy abilities within their respective fields based on literature provided from recent academic evaluation and CSU.

Demographic Applications to Collegiate Borders

Situated in Northern Colorado, land grant agricultural university CSU was the first university in the US to offer scholarships specifically for first generation students in 1984 (First Generation at CSU, 2020). Since the inception of this program, first-generation students have made up on average over twenty-five percent of the attending student body. CSU also hosts “The First Generation University Initiative” (FGUI) which aims to build specific learning environments for first generation students. FGUI is an example of many emerging programs and resources for first generation students throughout the country. One such resource is the online presence of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA), which provides detailed statistics and resources for first generation students.

Abundant and nationally accessible resources, such as FGUI, are important for student bodies that might not understand how to apply for college, how to pay for college, or how to succeed in college without these aids. CSU’s initiatives, resource centers, and a high first-generation student body make it a premier location to evaluate how these students establish their place in the collegiate body, interact in their classrooms, and perform on assignments. To understand why first-generation students fight different battles than continuing generation students requires an analysis of their statistical differences.

The boundaries that are crossed for first generation students are demonstratively higher than their continuing generation counterparts. These challenges are monetary, linguistic, educational, and experience based. University is already difficult to get right, to study in, to pass,

and to know where to get the right resources. If first generation students must combat a larger number of barriers including language, age, race, and socioeconomic challenges such as working while attending university, their success requires different skill sets. National statistics in the US show continuing generation students mostly come from families that earn on average \$90,000 annually, in comparison to the first-generation students whose families make \$41,000 (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2019). Further situations that might impact the financial situation of first-generation communities can often include a parental need to have their child working to help support their family while attending school, parental language barriers, as well as cultural expectations of gender roles within their communities. As a result of such monetary challenges, first-generation students hold 5% more jobs than their peers and work eight more hours a week on average, and additionally half of first-generation students do not work on campus unlike their continuing generation peers (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2019).

Holding jobs and/or supporting families through college isn't the first boundary first-generation students must cross. Race and gender largely dominate conversations about first-generation students because they are overwhelmingly female and predominately white, which often conflicts with pre-conceived expectations. Yet, universities that are built to serve minority communities admit an average of 59% of first-generation students. Minority admittance to university without continuing generation exclusivity is integral to the social progress of these groups, which includes providing services necessary for English language use guidance. The Postsecondary National Policy Institute (2018) reports "English is not a first language for nearly 20% of first-generation students" which can dramatically impact one's ability in an academic environment. While this may not be true for all circumstances, the diversity of English dialects

spoken in the home may provide barriers of entry to some students due to the strict borders of acceptable American academic dialect. This challenge can create difficulties for students in and out of the classroom among cohorts and professors alike.

Much of the collegiate experience is a collective communication between students on resources, university events, and sharing classroom knowledge in social spaces. Exclusion from “traditional” student groups can be demonstrated through an inability to access campus resources as well as the general educational preparedness for their coursework. As a result of managing attendance on their own, first generation students on average used less campus resources in comparison to continuing generation students, including academic support services, health services, and career services (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2019). In addition, first-generation students often face multiple challenges in their coursework and/or were subsequently not as prepared for their coursework as were the continuing education students. Reporting from NASPA shows six percent of first-generation students completed an advanced level math course such as calculus in their first year, in comparison with eighteen percent of continuing generation students, due to a general lack of preparedness upon collegiate entry in comparison with their cohorts (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2019). These differences demonstrate socio-economic inequalities between the two groups that can lead to further unpreparedness throughout their collegiate careers, such as the ability to perform self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy, Literacy and Acceptance

Ann M. Penrose’s article *Academic Literacy Perceptions and Performance: Comparing First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Students* opens with a quote from Mike

Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* that poignantly demonstrates how being left out of collegiate activities and conversations can impact students entering the classroom. Rose wrote:

“I was out of my league...

Many of my classmates came from and lived in a world very different from my own. The campus literary magazine would publish excerpts from the journals of upperclassmen traveling across Europe... I had never been out of Southern California, and this translated, for me, into some personal inadequacy. Fraternities seemed exclusive and a little strange... I'm not sure why I didn't join any of Loyola's three dozen societies and clubs... Posters and flyers and squibs in the campus newspaper gave testament to a lot of connecting activity, but John and I pretty much kept to ourselves...” (p. 43-44).

Rose's commentary helps provide an insight into how student to student familiarity impacts one's campus life. If a student feels excluded from the content in the school newspaper, there are likely to be greater challenges in feeling included in course groups and/or asking professors questions when surrounded by peers in a classroom environment. Penrose quotes a student she interviewed: “I realize I was not really that smart... Some of the kids that came in, they're from like these other great suburban schools... Sometimes we would have discussions in class, I wouldn't know what they were talking about and I would feel kind of left out” (p. 439). This commentary provides a look at how exclusion in the classroom can create a series of different learning environments for students and in particular non-traditional students.

The ability to adapt to tasks and overcome challenges is often called self-efficacy, and Cruces et.al (2005) writes first-generation students often struggle with this principle due to a variety of reasons, including lack of preparedness and confidence challenges. Research shows this general lack of confidence in the classroom can lead to self-isolation, getting behind, and

over time creates a general unpreparedness for future classroom tasks. Evaluation of this research shows that students who don't participate in their classroom environments and learn to question materials they are consuming can struggle in a similar way when joining the workforce.

College is used to build literacy in one's discourse community, that is to say learning the proper modes of communication with your superiors and peers in situations that may be drastically different from previous conversational experiences. Literacy, as defined by Deborah Brandt in *Literacy in American Lives* (2004) is:

“...a resource... which, like wealth or education, or trade skill or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers. To treat literacy in this way is to understand not only why individuals labor to attain literacy but also to appreciate why, as with any resource of value, organized economic and political interests work so persistently to conscript and ration the powers of literacy for their own competitive advantage” (p. 5).

Her description outlines the progressive challenges first generation students may face without the proper acclimation to their particular communities, and one may argue that in large part this is formulated at the collegiate level. In trade, professional literacy in one's discourse community comes from grueling apprenticeships and work, but in academia much of this is formed right in the classroom. If students are not included in initial discussions or do not feel included in discussions with their peers, development of this vital literary skill can lead to lifelong hinderances and battles.

Potential Success Solutions

Student success at the collegiate level requires at home and/or peer support, monetary ability to attend uninterrupted, and self-efficacy. Giving students the ability to meet these needs through the educational system when they are not offered elsewhere can help bridge gaps that might not otherwise be filled for first-generation students. At CSU, Arian Brazenwood shares his story with Tosha Jupiter, a writer for the campus magazine, *The Magazine*. Brazenwood's story is filled with struggle and perseverance to academic success. When Coleman Cornelius writes again about Arian's story he focuses on what made Arian's journey successful at CSU, and it was largely the comfort of having financial aid throughout his time at the university: "Thinking about all of the doors that have opened for me, I couldn't have gone through without a little help. Actually, a lot of help," Brazenwood said. "I am here because of the selflessness of others". Arian's journey echoes the voices of other CSU students facing similar circumstances. Aid helps. Aid comes in the form of tuition aid, food security, resources for tutoring, professors that are readily available to help students with varying needs, and student involvement on campus.

Penrose's research found student interaction at university was previously thought to be necessary only within the first year of attending university, but she writes that first-generation students more than other groups need the continued support throughout their collegiate careers (2002, p. 456). Student success can come in the form of face-to-face advising and also through networking programs designed for first-generation student inclusion. These student observations are echoed in Matthew C. Atherton's publication *Academic Preparedness of First-Generation College Students: Different Perspectives* as he writes:

"Frustration and lack of success contribute to overall difficulties in transitioning to college and ultimately to negative retention and attainment outcomes for first-generation students. The negative effects of social capital on first-generation student preparedness

are a key issue that needs to be addressed by colleges to ensure first-generation students' success. One way to address this issue is through outreach programs targeted at first-generation students" (p. 828).

CSU's First-Generation program targets these academically defined needs for first-generation students through their programs for these students. CSU offers resources to ease transitions, encourages student involvement, and offers mentorship to first-generation students.

Student success is most often defined as an economic journey or a cultural journey; however, for first-generation students it can also be a literacy journey that requires traversing and breaking numerous boundaries. Brandt writes in her conclusion to *Literacy in American Lives* "To an unprecedented extent, literacy became integral to economic competition and, as a consequence, became one of the human skills most valuable to its effects" (p. 188). Obtaining passage, entry, and exit of university requires having the capability to understand and apply necessary literacy skills to applications, advisors, with professors, with cohorts, and later prospective employers. If literacy is integral to economic competition as Brandt notes, then the collegiate system is the bouncer to the exclusive club of economic mobility for many first-generation students.

If universities better understand the demographics, needs, and boundaries first-generation students need to cross, despite having great self-efficacy in the face of greater adversity, what may still be seen as an exclusive avenue for the already educated, may instead become an inclusive place of opportunity. Resources necessary to aid students in their journey to crossing boundaries they might not have thought possible in the classroom involves professor education on the needs of varying types of students, places to access help in understanding core class materials, and ongoing mentorship from senior students. First-generation student success in and

outside of the classroom requires regular advising check-ins, orientations that directly outline student resources, borderless involvement opportunities, and inclusive, understanding student comfort resources such as food security options and financial aid.

Conclusion

The research shows first-generation students are often perceived as the underprepared, but often they just need basic resources continuing generations may already have in order to reach their potential. This analysis demonstrates preconceived borders require timely adjustment to the growing needs of expanding and changing populations across the United States. CSU's initiatives have a long history of meeting the needs of this important group of innovators, dreamers, and doers in the collegiate system and it continues to aid the goals of its first-generation students in a way NASPA once called "unmatched" (Cornelius). The issues and solutions offered in this analysis demonstrate avenues of further exploration across the country on a university to university basis. As social demography changes so will the needs of students; maintaining progression towards constant adequate assistance means a brighter future for not only first-generation students but the whole of society.

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