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Stereotypes and Their Effects on First-Generation College Students

Kimberlee Ward

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Abstract: More first-generation students are attending college than ever before, but they are not graduating at the same rates of non first-generation college students (Collier & Morgan 2007). Research attempting to identify, explain, and understand these differences focuses on retention rates, graduation rates, and barriers to success such as knowledge of college expectations, navigating resources, and a sense of belonging. While studies have documented how first-generation college students (FGCS) see their role in college, less work has investigated the stereotypes people hold of first-generation college students and the role these stereotypes play in the success of first-generation college students. Specifically we are lacking information about whether first-generation college students perceive stereotypes among the college community regarding their FGCS status and its relationship to school-readiness, what these stereotypes might entail, and how these stereotypes (if they exist) might contribute to negative academic outcomes. Investigation of this missing information, which the current study attempts to do, could lead to increased understanding of how to help first-generation college students with the challenges they face on a college campus.

Keywords: *college students, first-generation students, metastereotypes, stereotypes*

For many people, attending college and obtaining a college degree is an important step toward achieving a desired career. While college is challenging for all, some students, such as first generation college students (FGCS), who may not have a role model available to help guide them through the college process, endure more challenges than others. Despite the increased challenge, the number of first-generation students deciding to go to college is increasing because a bachelors degree thought to providing more profitable and stable career opportunities than a high school diploma.

The students who tend to endure more challenges than others are first-generation college students. Some not all first-generation college students belong to an ethnic minority group and said to be mainly either Black or Hispanic, being of lower socioeconomic status. The challenges first-generation college students may face are: lack of preparation, academic transition, and lack of family support and juggling school and work at the same time.

According to the Spring 2012 Census Report from a school in the Midwest there are 34% first-generation undergraduate college students currently attending, 21% are minorities, and 17%

are first-generation and low income. Low income is described as those who are eligible for the Pell grant. In addition, presented by the Council of Independent Colleges 57% of first-generation college students at a public 4-year university obtain a degree in six years. According to statistics not all remain in college for various reasons, such as not having enough money to pay for college (Chen, 2005).

The challenges that first-generation college students face have been researched extensively, but first-generation college students have not been looked at in relation to metastereotypes they may hold. Metastereotypes are stereotypes a person believes others hold about them. This should be done to take a look at what first-generation college students think in order to take a walk in their shoes. To see what college is like and how they think people view them from their perspective.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

Being in college I have realized that it takes a lot of determination, money, and engagement. In relation, I have dealt with having to work while going to school to support myself, maintain a social life, deal with depression, finding time to study, and staying involved as much as I can. I am

an undergraduate student who identifies as Black American, female, and first-generation. As someone who identifies with the population I am studying I would like to better understand the college experiences of first-generation college students while understanding my own experiences as well.

To be successful in college and obtain a college degree I have realized I need to be engaged and put in the time to learn the tools necessary to be the best student I can be, in addition to being a positive role model to incoming students, peers, and coworkers. To be the best student one can be and grow as a person it takes letting go of pride and asking for help, stepping outside of one's comfort zone, and getting involved in extracurricular activities. Also knowing who you are as a person is important. I have noticed that taking pride in being a Black American, female, and first-generation has boosted my self-esteem and contributed to my academic success. According to James Hertel (2002), "self-esteem was found to be one of the most predictive of college adjustment"(p. 15). To gain an understanding of the factors first-generation college students face, the study was built around this question: "What stereotypes are out there about first-generation college students?"

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

This study will explore current research on first-generation college students. It will bridge the gap in current research about first-generation college students by looking at the metastereotypes they hold, if any, and how that could be affecting them. To investigate there was two sessions of focus groups with first-generation college students. Since there is not much literature and metastereotypes on first-generation college students and we had to start from the beginning. Therefore, the study saw if stereotypes were held against first-generation college students, based on metastereotypes held by the first-generation college students

This study will help educators realize more minorities, who are considered first-generation college students are making the decision more

often to attend college. The following literature review took a deeper look into, first-generation college students and their environment, social identity theory, and metastereotypes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is how people define themselves in terms of their in-group with the assumption that part of a person's identity comes from their group memberships (Brown 2000). An in-group is a group that you identify with (e.g. being a first-generation college student and identifying with that group makes it an in-group you belong to). An out-group is the opposite, meaning it is a group that you do not belong to. People want their group to have a positive image and they want to be reflected positively. When you take a look at one's in-group vs. one's out-group it can reveal that some groups are more privileged than others. The group at a disadvantage is known as the subordinate group (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke 1999).

Moreover, people's identities change overtime (Amiot, Sablonnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007). Identification can be less with one group and more with another group depending on the social context revealing whether they are a low or high identifier (Amiot, Samionnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007). You may assume that if someone strongly identifies with a certain group then having to conform to something they don't want to or is outside of their culture could disrupt their ability to perform (Amiot, Samionnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007). When someone strongly identifies it is assumed they will stay within the in-group even in threat situations because they like that in-group.

If the group is disadvantaged that can lead to "negative social identity" (Mummendey, Kessler, Klink, & Mielke 1999). According to Mummendey, Kessler, Klink and Mielke (1999), "In social identity theory 'negative social identity' is defined as the result of an intergroup comparison with a negative outcome for one's own group" (p. 231). This causes in-group members to act in a certain way in order to please

the superior group, the out-group (Amiot, Samionnière, Terry, & Smith, 2007). This is important to know because they are conforming. They do not feel they have the ability to be themselves where it is socially acceptable. As mentioned previously this can disrupt one's ability to perform.

Stereotypes and Metastereotypes

According to Karlins, Coffman, and Walters (1969) "stereotypes are generalized impressions of groups, acquired by individuals from a number of sources, including sometimes direct experience with members of the stereotyped groups. The media is a big contributor and creates images that are irrespective of reality" (Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969). Research says that there has been a decline in prejudice and stereotyping (Karlins, Coffman, & Walters, 1969). Though, the research does not say that prejudice and stereotyping does not exist it just exist in newer forms meaning not as overt. Meaning there is more institutionalized discrimination and subliminal messages as opposed to slavery and lynching.

Prior research has confirmed that how one feels others perceive them strongly affects emotions (Finchilescu, 2005). Metastereotypes are the stereotypes, both negative and positive, that a person believes others hold about them or the groups to which they belong. According to Gillian Finchilescu (2005), "for a trait or characteristic to be a metastereotype, the perception must be shared by a significant portion of the in-group" (pg. 465), meaning most members of a group must believe that out-group members perceive them in a certain way. Notice that the existence of a metastereotype only requires the ingroup to *perceive or believe* that these attitudes are held about them, whether or not the outgroup actually holds these attitudes.

Positive stereotypes have good effects on the self while negative stereotypes have adverse effects on the self. Most metastereotypes are negative (Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2011). Not only does the person look at the negative description as a reflection of who they are but a reflection of the group they belong to as well

(Klein & Azzi, 2001). The negative stereotypes can affect a person's self-esteem, for example, if someone said that all Black people are loud and ghetto that could lower someone's confidence/self-esteem. This can result in the person not being as interactive with people.

These adverse effects can be amplified by the strength of a person's association with the group. According to social identity theory, when people identify with the group that is being looked at in a negative way, then they are more affected by the negative stereotype (Klein & Azzi, 2001). Yet, this is not true for everyone. In order to get rid of the unfavorable feeling and raise self-esteem, an individual may try to present their in-groups in a favorable way to out-group members (Klein & Azzi, 2001). Those who are high identifiers also describe their in-group more to others (Klein & Azzi, 2001).

Communicating an in-group to an out-group in a favorable way can be one way to cope with the negative consequences that resulted from the negative stereotypes. This helps with confidence knowing their group is being represented positively.

Metastereotype perception may also influence social interaction in other ways. For example, individuals who hold metastereotypes may decide not to interact with other groups, such as other races (Finchilescu, 2005). Individuals may fear that others will perceive them negatively based on their group membership, and that these out-group members will not want to associate with them. To avoid this negative interaction, individuals who perceive metastereotypes about their groups may simply avoid contact with the out-group individuals. According to Finchilescu (2005), this creates a form of "informal segregation" (p. 461). Informal segregation is when groups decide to separate on their own, it was not originally decided that they should be divided.

In addition, metastereotypes may lead to underperformance. For example, perception of metastereotypes may increase the likelihood that an individual experiences intergroup anxiety (Finchilescu, 2005). Research has mentioned that

self-esteem and self-awareness are negatively affected by anxiety that can lead to underperformance when the person is aware of the perception of out-group members (Finchilescu, 2005). According to Lammers, Gordign, and Otten (2008) people who are powerless (subordinate group) engage in more metastereotyping than those who have power (dominate group) (p. 1229). They do this because they are more consciously aware of their disadvantages from not having the same power. Power is defined as having the ability to influence the outcomes of the powerless (Lammers, Gordihn, & Otten, 2008). This phenomenon could show up at college where people fall into a dominant group and a subordinate group. First-generation would be considered a subordinate group. They may be seen as students who lack the knowledge about what being a college student entails and more likely to drop out.

Metastereotyping and Help Seeking Behavior

Metastereotyping can result in different outcomes one of them being the motivation to seek help. According to Wakefield, Hopkins, and Greenwood (2012) when an in-group receives help from an out-group without it being requested the in-group reacts negatively because it reminds them of their inferiority. This can lower the affect of the in-group and consequently the in-group views the out-group negatively (Wakefield, Hopkins, & Greenwood, 2012). When this happens the in-group can be reluctant to seek help when they need it because they do not want to reinforce their inferiority and make it seem like they are unable to do things on their own (Wakefield, Hopkins, & Greenwood, 2012).

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were first-generation college students between the ages of eighteen and twenty four (1 sophomore, 4 juniors). They were recruited through email and by personal invitation by the researcher.

Data Collection Procedure

Participants were invited to engage in focus groups, which were held in a classroom to ensure that each participant was able to fully express him or herself without distraction. The first focus group had three participants and ran for 15 minutes. The second focus group had two participants and ran for 10 minutes.

At the beginning of each session, the researcher explained the purpose of the study and why they were chosen to participate. A consent form was distributed in order to ensure them that their information would remain confidential. The consent form also informed the participants of the risks and benefits of the study. Participants were informed that the focus groups would be tape-recorded so the researcher could refer back to the participants' comments. Finally, they were informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point.

The focus groups were guided to discuss the topics listed below. At the end of each focus group debriefing forms with the contact information for the researcher were provided in case the participants wanted to follow up with the researcher about what was found. It also provided information about counseling services in case they felt uncomfortable and needed to talk with someone about the topics that were discussed. Below are the questions used in the focus groups:

1. What does it mean to be a first-generation college student?
2. What do your friends and family think about you being a first-generation college student?
3. What are the negative stereotypes held about first-generation college students?
4. Tell me about a time when someone held a negative stereotype about you being a first-generation college student?
5. Tell me about a time when someone held a positive stereotype about you being a first-generation college student?
6. What are some specific qualities that define first-generation college students based on the stereotypes you mentioned earlier?

7. Are there stereotypes about you that impact your experiences as a first-generation college student? If yes, what are they?
8. What stereotypes do you think faculty holds about you being a first-generation college student?
9. Why do you think they hold these specific stereotypes about first-generation college students?

Data Analysis

After using a tape recorder to collect the data the recordings were put into an application called Express Scribe to help with transcription. Once the recordings were fully transcribed it was printed so they could be coded. The transcriptions were coded to find similarities between the two focus groups and their participants. The transcriptions were reviewed eight+ times to ensure that everything in the transcriptions was accounted for and everything in the transcription was placed in the correct category by common theme. Once this was done, the recordings were deleted from the recorder and deleted from Express Scribe.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Challenges Faced

Since the start of their academic journey the participants report having faced difficulties being a first-generation college student. The most commonly reported difficulties among the focus group participants included lack of basic knowledge of college and pressure placed on by their families on account of them being the first person in their family to go to college.

Basic Knowledge. Participants expressed that they had a lack of understanding of what college life would be like, what was expected of them, and resources that were provided on campus. Being the first person in their family to go to college, they did not have anyone before them to give them the tools necessary to be successful in college. For example, one participant referred to having to work harder because there was no one

there before her to help guide her through. She had to “go in blind and hope it all worked out.”

[I] have to work harder because you do not have an understanding of what it looks like, what you are going to go through, or even potentially what the workload is going to be like. What it looks like to be a first-generation student for me is realizing the struggle because there is no one ahead of you that has paved the way.

Another participant talked about how his family was traditional and did not understand why he did not “just get a job” suggesting that college was unnecessary or a waste of time and money when one could be getting paid already:

My father was very old school and very old tradition...getting an education after high school is kind of a waste of time and so he would ask me, why are you going to waste your time? Why don't you get a job? ...it is definitely a struggle fighting back and forth but in the end I am going to do what is best for me and I think he understood that after a while now he definitely supports me. It was a rough ride at the beginning.

Knowing what college is about can help students navigate their way through college. Knowing where resources are can contribute to academic success. Being aware of what college entails can help students integrate within their new environment. Past literature supports the idea that compared to second-generation college students; first-generation college students are unaware of what college is about and what is expected of them on a basic level. Such as what the professor expects and what the homework load is like. This research further supported previous research suggesting that, aside from basic knowledge regarding how to succeed in college, FGCS’ “experiences often involve cultural as well as social and academic transitions” (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996, p. 2). That is what the participants explained when talking about the

struggle to become informed when their family or others were not knowledgeable or supportive.

Expectations. The participants also talked about how they felt like they were under pressure to perform well since, being in college, they were seen by their family as starting a new cycle and did not want to let them down.

One participant discussed how she and her brother both left home to go to college and, now that he is no longer in college, she feels like more pressure has been placed on her to do well:

...For me since me and my brother started but now he is not in school. I feel like the weight is on me to be like, okay, well, you have to hold it down for our family...especially since I have come so far already. But I feel a lot of pressure.

Another student reported similar feelings:

I feel almost the opposite way I feel like when people know that about me that I am the first one they assume (even though she has a brother who attends college as well), I feel like there is more pressure to do really well. Since everything is counting on you, since you are your family's hope, you should be doing the absolute best in all of your classes...you are expected to be the best representation [of the family].

The notion that there was pressure to do well being a first-generation college students was common among the participants. No one has been down the path before so there seems to be a lot of pressure to not mess up and to set a good example for those who will come after them.

Theme 2: Viewpoints

The participants talked a lot about what they think being a first-generation student entails, how they see first-generation college students, and how they think faculty view first-generation college students. All participants expressed that a first-generation college student is someone who is the first in their family to go to college and that includes graduating.

Faculty Views. The participants discussed what they believed faculty thinks of first-generation college students.

Student 1 had mentioned that this could apply to race and first-generation students overall. After being asked, what stereotypes do you think faculty holds about you being a first-generation college student?

I guess this could apply for race and most first-generation students in general. I think probably [faculty believe] that we are scared and probably will not ask questions or [are] not really going to be that involved in our education...even in just discussion or your grades or that extra mile. I do not think that is automatically assumed, 'Eh, they're just another number.'

Another participant remarked that the question was difficult to answer because she thinks the stereotypes faculty hold could be positive:

I think [the stereotypes faculty hold about FGCS] can be positive, but I also think it can kind of be like, "Oh, they're first-generation college students... they may not work as hard or they might not try as hard because they are the first ones." It's kind of a tough one to answer.

Another student suggested that racial stereotypes may inform the stereotypes faculty use to understand FGCS:

I hate to put it this way, but I feel like I'm still focusing on race because that is what is frustrating on this campus. It is going off the stereotypes that we get with race and whatever race those students are associated with, then those are what the faculty goes off of... 'Oh this student is not going to work as hard, this student isn't going to want to participate in class discussions, or this student is not smart.'

The metastereotypes that the participants hold affect whether they actually do participate in

class. According to past research if a student feels like they do not belong then they will be reluctant to participate in class. A suggestion for this would be to change the learning environment and create more opportunities to participate (Lundberg, Schreiner, Houvaguimian, & Miller, 2007). When you are in an environment that is new it is important to feel comfortable. The literature reported that students felt that faculty did not care as much about them (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Media. One participant talked about the media and how faculty might use media portrayals of first-generation college students to inform their opinions of first-generation college students:

Another factor I also think is media, definitely with our generation. It is different from [that of the faculty] and what they come from. They grew up with certain television, music, everything. Being that now our generation is different, like children getting pregnant at younger ages or stuff like that, and cuss words in songs they are going to take that media and kind of portray it on us...even students who do not do that stuff. That image of what they see or what is portrayed on television, radio, or something like that, I think sometimes can play a big role in identifying or categorizing who we are.

First-Generation College Student Views of First-Generation College Students/Themselves. The participants mentioned the characteristics or traits they feel apply to first-generation students. A couple of them mentioned that first-generation students are hardworking and another participant added that a first-generation college student is someone who respects him or herself and yet another participant mentioned that she was doing this for herself and her family.

One participant mentioned the college environment and being optimistic in new situations:

[I believe FGCS are] optimistic only because you really do not have a choice. If

you are put into a situation that you never been in before or you do not know someone that has been in the situation before you have no choice but to be optimistic. You are in a new environment that you are probably going to be in for a while...at least four years. [An] optimistic trait is definitely common for first-generation college students.

Another participant mentioned that first-generation college students could be described using words like “drive”, “ambitious”, and “exemplary”. An additional participant talked about how first-generation students were more social because they had to be independent and navigate things on their own:

Everyone is very social, with first-generation, because we haven't had anyone tell us what to do since we got to college. We feel like we have to ask everyone questions, which have made us more social and more outgoing, and more curiosity -- that drive. [This 'social-ness' is] what kind of got us to be where we are today.

The participants here presented evidence about what traits applied to first-generation college students. This presents new views to current research, such as the added requirement of being more social than they would otherwise be in order to successfully navigate college. These results also add to the understanding of how people, such as faculty members, perceive first-generation college students versus how first-generation college students actually perceive themselves. Specifically, the views they believe faculty hold about first-generation college students are in complete contradiction to how they believe FGCS actually are, but perhaps both come from an understandable position. First-generation college students believe they are hard workers. According to past research, first-generation college students often work to support themselves while going to school at the same time (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996), which suggests a strong work ethic. However,

divided attention between work and academics could potentially lead faculty to believe that first-generation college students are not as serious about their academic work as more traditional college students, because they have less time to put into it.

Stereotypes. When asked about positive stereotypes the participants talked about turning negative stereotypes into something that is positive. This is where metastereotypes come into play and are activated. So metastereotypes, or the stereotypes we believe others hold about us, can potentially be used to manipulate the situation. For example, one student talked about how she has turned a negative into a positive:

I guess I can [give an example of] a negative [stereotype] that has turned into positive, because usually I think what's common for first-generation students is not necessarily saying that people think you are going to fail, but they don't think you are going to do as well, and to reflect that positively I would be, like, 'first-generation students will proceed to do well because they know that they have to work a lot harder to keep progressing.

Another participant explained how someone told him that he was lucky because of his race, but the participant interpreted that statement differently because that was not fact:

From my experience I know that I have been told, "Oh, you're very lucky! Oh, you're so lucky! You did this... It's your ethnicity! You got lucky because of that," and I'm like, "No, I actually worked hard for this. We all did. We are all here for maybe different majors but for essentially an education... for me that is a negative stereotype because none of us were lucky... we worked hard.

Race. Race came up a lot when talking about positive and negative stereotypes they think others hold about them. It may be that racial stereotypes are not distinguishable from first-generation college student stereotypes, or that first-generation college students status comes second

to racial status when activating stereotypes about an individual.

One student referenced being a Black woman on a predominantly white campus and how that affects her personally:

I mean I definitely think being on a predominately white campus there is a big issue with being Black, and being a woman of color because I feel like there is only a select few... I feel like the first thing anybody says about a black woman is that she's caddy, ratchet, or ghetto. Or even I feel like those stereotypes are put against more on darker skinned women... I kind of face those every day and I put myself in the positions I am in just so people know that your stereotypes are not right and we are more than what you think.

Another participant, expanding on another student's remarks:

For the most part, I think a big thing would be like she (student 2) was saying earlier is that not all first-generation students are of minority [ethnicity]. But that is all that is talked about is the minority, so that is kind of pre-assumed to be like, "Hmm, every minority that comes in this class is probably first generation," when probably more than half of the class is... White people, Black people, everybody can be a first-generation student.

Another participant mentioned that being in a class where you are not only of a minority ethnicity, but also one of the only people in the class with this status could be motivating:

Being in a class of, like, 70 Caucasian students and me being, like, one of the four Latinos in the entire class, in a way, is motivation for me because I know I am going to keep up with what I am going to do... I know there are a lot of stereotypes with Mexicans not being smart. They are worthy in the [agricultural] field but not in education or school. That is something that

is hurtful to me but also because I show people I can do this or I can do that. So in a way I do not take it as a bad thing because I know I am going to prove them wrong.

Many participants described things that were frustrating for them being on a campus that is predominantly White. It is believed race, socioeconomic status, and gender are intertwined with being a first generation college student. Though, race is a more identifiable trait (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Theme 3: Additional Thoughts

Not all of the comments expressed within the focus groups fell under a common theme. However, because the goal of the research is to inform educators of the lives and experiences of first-generation college students, these miscellaneous comments are included here. These interesting viewpoints can give us insight to topics that many not commonly be discussed by educators, but which are obviously of great importance to first-generation college students.

Opportunity. One participant talked about how people probably think that she decided to go to college and strayed away from a harder path, that going to college was a way to have an easier lifestyle than the one her non-college educated family members live. The current literature supports the idea that first-generation college students are typically from low socioeconomic backgrounds and may view college as a way out of that status because it increases your chances of moving up socioeconomically:

Yeah, I would say that people sometimes maybe assume that I veered from a harder path or something and [have] chosen to go to college, whereas for me, I literally can't think of a time where I didn't know I was going to be going to college. It wasn't a choice.

Additional Thoughts. At the end of each session, participants were asked whether there was anything that they would like to add after going through all the questions. One group

wanted to discuss student support on campus. Both participants agreed that there could or should be more support for first-generation college students on campus. They also suggested that the support available on campus could be made more visible to students who might benefit from the programs, as the students who need the help are not always aware of the existence of these programs:

I think there should be more support on campus. I mean [the program that currently exists] is a good supporter of first-generation college students, but I feel like there should be more awareness or more programs. Even like a class to prepare you better, because if your parents did not go to college, how are they supposed to prepare you properly? There should be more programs that help first-generation college students really succeed.

Yeah, I agree because [...] I never heard of that [program]. My best friend at the time was in [the program], and that is how I heard of it, but I never knew it existed.

DISCUSSION

The goal of this investigation was to take a look at the student's views, determine the metastereotypes they hold, and see if there are stereotypes out there about first-generation college students. Specifically, it examined whether this group of students perceive others as holding stereotypes about first-generation college students and what they perceive this stereotype to entail.

In psychology it is commonly known that a stereotype can be positive or negative but the general population knows stereotype as something that is negative.

Despite the fact that this study was specifically about stereotypes regarding first-generation college students, race/ethnicity was mentioned frequently. Participants expressed that it was difficult to distinguish whether their experiences were likely due to others' stereotypes about their racial group or their first-generation

student status. While it is possible that the two are inextricably linked together, future research could attempt to disentangle the effects of first-generation status from that of other stereotypes, such as race, gender, and socioeconomic status.

A couple of participants talked about how coming to college was a matter of opportunity. A few participants suggested that stereotypes about first-generation college students include assumptions about the family of the student, not just the student themselves. They state that the reason they are the first college student in the family is not because they are the first to have the drive or the intellectual ability to do so. Simply, they are the first to have the opportunity to do so. For example, one student stated that “when you are a first-generation student you are seen as someone who is doing well and going out there ambitious and all that, but I feel like that is kind of insulting because if my mom could have she would have went to college it is just the matter of opportunity.”

The study was originally going to include a quantitative study to supplement the qualitative interviews. Based on the interviews, the researchers intended to create an adjective checklist regarding characteristics that might possibly describe the first-generation college student stereotype. This checklist was meant to be distributed to second-generation college students, those who have had someone in their immediate family obtain at least a bachelor’s degree, and have them rate the adjectives with respect to how well they described first-generation college students. The purpose of the adjective checklist was to determine whether stereotypes that traditional college students hold about first-generation college students actually matched the metastereotypes the first-generation college students perceive as existing. While this study was unable to make these connections, future researchers might be able to determine whether first-generation college students’ perceptions of stereotypes are well founded.

Another interesting line for future research might be to determine the level of involvement of

first-generation college student on campus. The participants in this study mentioned how they needed to be more “social” in order to “survive” the college atmosphere. But do all first-generation college students perceive this need? Investigating the differences in terms of academic success and mental health between first-generation college students who are involved on campus compared to those who are not would help to determine how crucial this social involvement is to success in college for this particular population. It is possible that the “type” of social involvement could also make a difference. For example, some of the participants in this study stated that majority of their friends are first-generation college students. Is this true of all first-generation college students? Are first-generation college students who have a strong base of other first-generation friends more likely to succeed? It is possible that these individuals may have more access to or knowledge of support structures that are tailored to first-generation needs because of the social network. Or is social involvement in the campus important, despite who you interact with?

Limitations of this study include the small sample size. A larger sample size would help to further determine whether the views stated by the few individuals involved in the current study are indicative of first-generation college students in general.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Each university works to provide the best resources that they can to their students to broaden their horizons and create boundless opportunities, where all students have equal access to these opportunities. This mission may be more easily achieved if universities began to reach out to these under-served populations from the very beginning. This could begin with the admissions and registration process. For example, college representatives, while visiting high schools to recruit future students, could include information in their presentation or materials about resources and programs on campus centered around first-generation college students or underrepresented populations. This information

could also be more prominently highlighted during new student orientation. Maybe at the sign up desk volunteers could have a mini survey that asks students if they are first-generation, if they are they could hand them a brochure that list where they could go for support. The participants brought up the issue there needs to be more awareness so these recommendations could be good ways to inform students about the existing structures and increase the likelihood that students will request access to these programs.

Next, would be to have services on campus that would assist first-generation college students once they get to campus. A recommendation would be to have a class more centered on learning about campus, what is expected, and how to feel comfortable within the environment. It could talk about things such as financial literacy, how to get involved on campus, and upcoming events. This also could be beneficial for all students, as the transition from high school to college can be bumpy for many students, being away from home for the first time. This would give all students a contact or resource for navigating these various obstacles. There could be a section of this class specifically for first-generation college students, or a segment of the curriculum devoted to first-generation concerns.

If social integration (especially integration with other first-generation students) is important, colleges could also designate dorm floors to be specific to first-generation college students in the same way that they do for the arts or honors groups, or other specific community such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, queer (GLBTQ).

All of these recommendations focus on assuring students that there is support on campus for them, and ensuring that they know where to go for support. Really taking a look at the programs, resources that are already on campus, looking at how to improve the campus and the programs can be constructive. This benefits first-generation college students in increasing the likelihood that they will be successful on campus, but also benefits the university in lowering its attrition rate and boosting its graduation rate.

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