Original Paper

First-Generation College Students' Integration into Higher Education

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Abstract

First-generation college students face many challenges transitioning into school. This research included details relating to the difficulties facing the scholars and how college educators can address the needs. Understanding the concerns of first-generation college students is critical for the implementation of comprehensive programs to provide support for first-generation students. Appropriate support is not being put in place, and the problem is college educators do not understand first-generation college students' burdens. An insufficient exploration of the issues surrounding institutional structures within the higher education community to support this population represents a gap in the literature. The purpose of this qualitative instrumental case study was to explore the perspectives of the first-generation students and university representatives regarding the necessary interventions designed for learning. Research questions helped to identify the viewpoints of the scholars and set the foundation for all-inclusive plans. 26 participants were interviewed, 15 of whom were included in four small focus groups and 17 of whom participated in in-depth interviews. Program policy documents were reviewed as well. The analysis involved coding the information for themes and interpretations, which findings suggest providing a more collaborative system with comprehensive support for first-generation college students. Best practices for transformational changes were linked to maintaining sustainable relationships and integrating cultural competence for the learners.

Keywords

college education, first-generation college, cultural competence, transformational change

1. Introduction

The overall rate for college students completing a bachelor's degree is 58.3% (Shapiro, Dundar, Huie, Wakhungu, Bhimdiwala, & Wilson, 2018). While 58.3% of learners finish school, 41.7% do not, and poor retention rates cost colleges $14.5 billion a year (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). High retention rates are crucial for colleges and universities to maintain more students who pay tuition and fees and achieve academic success (Burke, 2019). The risk of dropping out is much greater for first-generation college learners who face financial burdens and often work long hours to satisfy school charges (Quinn, Cornelius-White, MacGregor, & Uribe-Zarain, 2019). Students face many hurdles financially, academically, psychologically, and socially while transitioning into college which cause these learners to leave. Goals are set within the colleges and universities to support traditional, non-traditional, transfer, and minority students coming from various socioeconomic and academic backgrounds (Manyanga, Sithole, & Hanson, 2017). First-generation learners are among the diverse groups in higher education for whom professionals seek developmental activities to understand the needs of students (Quinn et al., 2019).

First-generation college students are the focus of college representatives (Schwartz, Kanchewa, Rhodes, Gowdy, Stark, Horn, & Spencer, 2018). University administrators are preparing criteria to meet the social and academic needs of the learners who are confronted with psychological, economic, and cultural issues transitioning into the environment (Checkoway, 2018). Thirty-three percent of first-generation college students are likely to leave three years after enrollment, compared to 26%2 of non-first-generation students (Cataldi et al., 2018). Thirty-four percent of the undergraduate population in the United States comprises individuals who are the first in the family to go to school (Quinn et al., 2019). First-generation college students include minorities, students with lower incomes, older students, adults with children, and students who reside at or near home (Hutchison, 2017).

First-generation college students often are overwhelmed while transitioning into school (Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). Novices in the first semester of school have a decreased sense of belonging due to lack of support, racial microaggressions, and family challenges (Means & Pyne, 2017). Many learners are burdened with working while going to school to help pay for expenses (Adams, Meyers, & Beidas, 2016). Newcomers often lack an understanding of loans and leave college with high debt (Means & Pyne, 2017). These disparities are leading the higher education community to come up with new approaches surrounding the issues (Schwartz et al., 2018).

The problem addressed is students are not getting the proper support from faculty, administrators, and advisors in understanding the needs of first-generation college students (Manyanga et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2018). Whitley et al. (2018) found, although support programs are in place for first-generation college students, a focus on the ineffective support programs is needed for a more comprehensive approach for first-generation college students. Toutkoushian, Stollberg, and Slaton

(2018) noted policymakers and higher education researchers need to consider the needs of first-generation college students and the effectiveness and efficiency of student support programs. First-generation college students face academic, psychological, social, cultural, and financial challenges transitioning to a college campus (Radunzel, 2017). As a result of these burdens, a majority of students drop out without the proper resources or necessary services for specific needs.

The qualitative case study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: What are the perspectives of first-generation college students regarding comprehensive support intervention programs?

RQ 2: What are the perspectives of college staff members regarding comprehensive support intervention programs for first-generation college students?

RQ 3: What are the best practices of college staff members to support a transformational change within the higher education system for first-generation college students?

2. Method

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perspectives of first-generation college students, faculty, administrators, and advisors regarding the necessary support interventions and the need for comprehensive support programs designed for students. The study provided evidence regarding the effectiveness of student support programs and what aspects are most efficient to address the challenges of first-generation college students. If students do not receive comprehensive support programs, learners could continue to drop out and not gain the upward economic and social mobility benefiting other college students (Mead, 2018). The study contributed to the knowledge base by providing evidence of the effectiveness of support programs and the need for more comprehensive intervention plans. As a result of this study, first-generation college students may prosper, and the higher education community may gain improved recognition with the retention of learners.

2.1.1 Research Design

This research study used a qualitative case study design. Specifically, an instrumental case study design was used to explore the issues of first-generation college students, among faculty members, administrators, and advisors, and the need for comprehensive support programs. Harrison et al. (2017) noted case study design can address the *what* questions of an issue and evaluate complex issues in context. Variation of individual experiences within a single case can provide for the generalization of results.

2.1.2 Data Collection

Data collected for this study came from three sources: program policy documents obtained from the university website, focus groups, and 17 in-depth interviews. Documents were collected to obtain information about the support programs available to first-generation college students. The program policy documents were reviewed, and notes were taken about the content on a laptop computer. During the review of the documents, care was taken to exclude records with a prior version of the current policy which would contain obsolete information. The official documents were public and stored on a password-protected laptop kept in a locked office and would not require additional security.

Focus groups were used to provide an in-depth understanding of the perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and attitudes of a group of people toward a particular topic (Ilgaz, 2019). The focus groups included first-generation college students, faculty members, administrators, and advisors. The focus groups were comprised of 15 participants which included first-generation college students, administrators, and an advisor. The focus group participants were afforded sufficient space and time for micro-dynamics of power to be performed within the discussion to allow valuable insights (Ayrton, 2019). There were no concerns with the interviewer managing power within the group and the focus group discussions flowed smoothly within the parameters of the issue. The focus groups, conducted at a date and time convenient for the participants, were expected to last 60 minutes. The ability of focus groups to foster discussion and alter opinions in addition to providing direct responses is important.

3. Results

The data analysis involved providing an overview of the themes and codes used in the data collection coding process. The three overarching themes: collaborative support, integrated support, and transformative changes, were developed from the coding analysis. Collaborative support included first-generation college students' need to connect with others and build relationships within a comprehensive support program. Integrated support involved process changes aiding a more all-inclusive environment within a comprehensive support program. Transformative changes incorporate the best practices for the higher education industry to create transformational change. The themes and codes used for the data analysis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Codes Used for Analysis

Theme	Codes
Collaborative support	Sense of belonging
	Social equality
	Connection with others
	Systemic resources
	Navigation with a trusted advisor
	Low socioeconomic status
	Academic readiness
	Developing supportive relationships
	Cultural understanding
Integrated support	Holistic needs of the students
	Supportive relationships
	Cultural integration
Transformative changes	Comprehensive support
	Sustainable relationships
	Cultural competence

Discrepancies in the need for support for first-generation college students were found during data analysis. Twenty-three participants reported the need for academic, social, and financial support services, while one believed there was no need to seek support services. As the data were reviewed, categories were created through an inductive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The qualitative study involved a social problem which revealed themes surrounding the issues of first-generation college students. The three overarching themes were collaborative support, integrated support, and transformative changes. **Collaborative Support**

The theme of collaborative support was linked to Research Question 1: *What are the perspectives of first-generation college students with comprehensive support intervention programs?* Collaborative support was additionally established as a key component of the needs of first-generation college students. The perspectives of first-generation college students with comprehensive support intervention programs were identified as: (a) the need to belong with others in the campus environment, (b) a desire for social equality, (c) the influence of connecting with others, (d) having systemic resources within the programs, (e) the requirement to navigate resources with a trusted advisor, (f) amplification of the awareness of the stigma associated with low socioeconomic status, (g) the importance of academic readiness, (h) the significance of developing supportive relationships, and (i) the ability for others to

understand the various cultures of first-generation college students. The participants reported the desire for collaborative assistance within the comprehensive support intervention programs. Collaborative support represents the social, psychological, and academic infrastructure stemming from the challenges faced by the learners. The three highest needs of first-generation college students are described in Table 2.

Table 2. Frequency of Codes Related to the Collaborative Support Theme

Code	Frequency
Sense of belonging	14
Social equality	12
Connection with others	14

Sense of belonging. The sense of belonging code reflected the students' need to belong and the influence on the college experience for the first-generation college students. Challenges with the need to belong were present with the transition of students on campus. Collaborative support from peers, faculty, administrators, and advisors served as the catalyst for the students within the community network. All 14 first-generation college students noted the significance of belonging.

The importance of adapting to the college environment had an impact on the learners. The participant's need to belong reflected the importance of the desire for all participants to be included within the college environment. Understanding the struggles of the students and the feelings of inferiority are vital components for collaborative support. Setting up an environment complete with synergistic support is necessary for the retention of students.

Social equality. The code of social equality represented the participants' experiences with identity and culture as first-generation college students. All 14 first-generation college students desired to create social equity. Nine of the 14 participants were minorities and noted ethnicity was a significant part of feeling inferior to non-minorities within the college environment. The feeling of inferiority made the participants' fitting into the university setting more difficult. Five White participants: (a) referenced being frustrated with not being able to get financial help because of not being poor enough, and (b) linked having money with inequality. One White participant felt her middle-class status hindered her ability to get financial aid and the necessary resources to allow her to afford college. Social equality was recognized as important to inspire the learners transitioning into higher education. Social equality was noted as a key component by the students.

Connection with others. The connection with others code served to show the eagerness of participants to relate to others. All 14 first-generation college students mentioned the importance of connecting with

others. All the participants referenced the need to connect with other first-generation college students as an integral part of feeling motivated in the college setting. The learners felt the need to interact with others as a component to belonging to the community of first-generation college students. Being a first-generation college student was a commonality which allowed the learners to bond. The connection with other students enabled the learners to broaden the network and form a group with a common purpose. A community and sense of belonging give first-generation college students confidence and establish an identity for learners.

Systemic resources. The systemic resources code involved the importance of linking the resources to meet the needs of first-generation college students. Connecting resources which are accessible to all learners is invaluable. All 14 first-generation college students recognized the significance of setting up a system supporting the learners. Systemic resources were referenced as the supporting mechanisms with college staff. A critical component for first-generation college students is to understand the logistics of each program and how the programs interrelate to facilitate the path of the students through college. The learners identified the need to have guidance within a university environment. Understanding how the components are intertwined was a critical element. Creating an environment in which the learners can freely access systemic resources available to all first-generation college students is important.

Navigation with a trusted advisor. The navigation with a trusted advisor code represented the significance for staff to build trust while helping first-generation college students navigate college-provided resources. All 14 first-generation college students referenced the importance for advisors to listen and have trust with navigating the social, financial, psychological, and academic resources available to all students, particularly for the needs of first-generation college students. The trusted advisors helped build confidence for the participants while navigating the system. The learners needed to be with someone throughout the process. The critical element of listening is a key component for students with understanding the guidance. The importance for the student to realize the trust of the advisor is invaluable. A crucial issue for students is to acknowledge the sincerity and support of the counselor. The advisor listens, empathizes, and directs the students through the maze of college life.

Low socioeconomic status. The code of low socioeconomic status was created to highlight the awareness of the differences in social status and the stigma associated with first-generation college students. Nine of the 14 first-generation college students identified as having low socioeconomic status. Low socioeconomic status was a stigma reported by the participants. Nine first-generation college students revealed the difference in socioeconomic status was part of the college environment and feeling of belonging. The other five first-generation college students were from a middle-class socioeconomic status and did not sense the same stigma. Being from a middle-class socioeconomic status was a hindrance in moving to a wealthier status for the five participants. Students were able to

see the effects of wealth within the social aspects of the college. The example of wealth contributes to the creation of the barrier between students with different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Academic readiness. The academic readiness code is related to the knowledge and skills of first-generation college students upon entering college and the influence on the retention of learners. Inadequacy of academic preparedness was reflected in the learning of first-generation college students. All 14 first-generation college students reported challenges with academic readiness. Students may seem inadequate and unprepared for the academic demands of college life. The learner could develop low self-esteem and have subpar performance compared to other students. The lack of academic readiness may allow the students to lose engagement, fail, and drop out of school. Academic readiness is a crucial component for the success of students and the college. Successful students can add value to the communities.

Developing supportive relationships. The code of developing supportive relationships was found to be a significant factor with the first-generation college students in building close connections for increasing student confidence in the integration into college. All 14 first-generation college students felt the need to develop supportive relationships to be more comfortable in the university community. The learners acknowledged the ability of others to understand and empathize is a critical part of the framework surrounding the integration into higher education. The participants reported the supportive relationships were a positive influence on the commitment of college learners. Students acknowledged empathy and understanding were critical elements contributing to a sense of purpose as well as developing a rapport with others. Interacting with the support staff is a key component of helping the learners connect to resources.

Cultural understanding. The cultural understanding code related to the participants' identifying the impact one's culture has on the learning and development of first-generation college students. Of the 14 first-generation college students, 12 indicated a lack of understanding of the culture of the learners. The participants felt the need for others to understand how culture impacts the daily interactions of the students. The necessity for others to have lived experiences with cultural differences was crucial for the learners to be empowered and able to connect as first-generation college students. A key component within the college environment is the acknowledgment of culture.

Integrated Support

The integrated support theme was linked to Research Question 2: *What are the perspectives of college staff members regarding comprehensive support intervention programs for first-generation college students?* The college staff members identified a vision of an all-inclusive environment to meet the holistic needs of students, developing supportive relationships, and building cultural integration around the needs of first-generation college students within the comprehensive intervention programs. Integrated support catering to the specific needs of each student was established through the staff

members' relationships with the first-generation college students in the programs. The college staff members were committed to providing a network of resources for addressing all the social, psychological, financial, and cultural issues facing first-generation college students. Building a close rapport with the students inspired the learners to grow professionally. Mentoring, coaching, and counselling were found to be necessary services within the chain of support for the students. The framework of integrated support through college staff members is a key component for the students to advance in higher education.

Holistic needs of the students. The code of holistic needs of the students reflected the responses of college staff members regarding how current resources may be adapted to serve the needs of first-generation college students better within the comprehensive support intervention programs. All 12 college staff members noted the importance of recognizing the support from a holistic view. Looking at the complete needs of the learner would be beneficial as students integrate into higher education. The resources available to the students were not sufficient to support the needs from a holistic standpoint. Communication of the student issues more fluently between the college staff members and the students may help the administrators develop programs to better adapt the services for first-generation college students. The accessibility of the programs is necessary to provide holistic support for the students.

Supportive relationships. The code of supportive relationships included the importance of the college staff members to provide a trusting partnership for first-generation college students within the roles of mentors, coaches, advisors, administrators, and faculty. The 12 college staff members noted the value of supportive relationships with the learners. The staff members' ability to develop relationships helped build a safe secure network for the students. Understanding the experiences of learners is vital to create trust. Establishing a bond with first-generation students is essential to provide support.

Cultural integration. The code of cultural integration included the need to recognize the significance of culture related to first-generation college students within the work of college staff members. One of the key components of cultural integration is the acknowledgment of the identity of first-generation college students. The college staff members' ability to understand how the culture of the students is integrated throughout the journey of education was crucial for the personal and professional growth of the students. Adapting the behavior of college staff members is a key component for learners to grow within the college environment.

Transformative Changes

Transformative changes were linked to Research Question 3: *What are the best practices of college staff members to support a transformational change within the higher education system for first-generation college students?* All 26 participants from the interviews and focus groups recognized the need for best practices to support transformative changes within the higher education system for the integration and retention of first-generation college students in school. The best practices of college

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staff members were identified to highlight the integral support needed for a transformational change within the higher education system for first-generation college students. Transformational change is created by change agents who follow best practices to serve first-generation college students (Mayes & Gethers, 2018). Three best practices were revealed from the participants to help support the transformational change for first-generation college students within the higher education system: comprehensive support, sustainable relationships, and cultural competence. Each of the best practices is discussed as follows (see Figure 1).
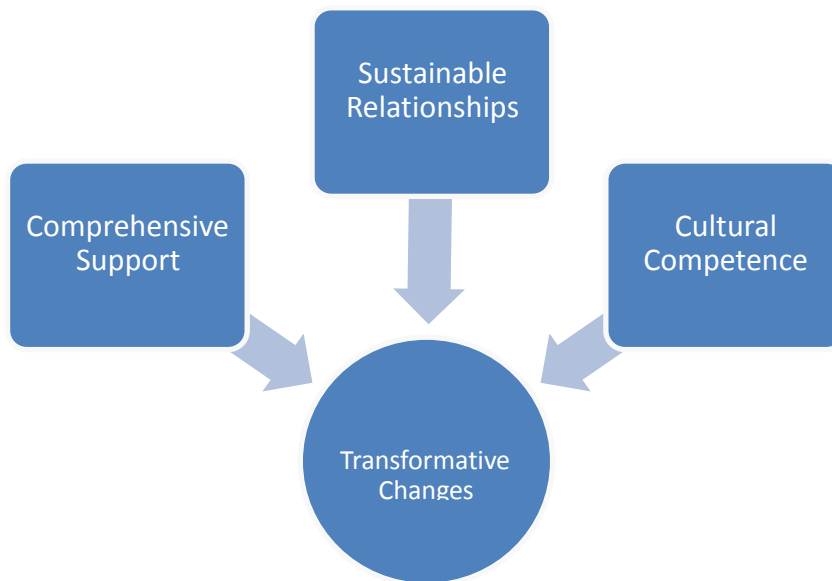

Figure 1. Transformative Changes. This Figure Shows Best Practices for Transformational Change

Comprehensive support. The code of comprehensive support represented the assimilation of services and programs provided by college staff for first-generation college students. Comprehensive support is a critical element of best practices to support all the needs of first-generation college students. Transformative changes within the college or university may be identified by a model framework consisting of a comprehensive support environment. The need for more comprehensive support is a vital part of best practices to support transformative changes within the higher education system for the integration and retention of first-generation college students. Creating strategies to centralize resources was reported as a key component for comprehensive support. Building an infrastructure to reinforce equity and inclusion are fundamental for a comprehensive system. Designing accessibility within the network is crucial.

Sustainable relationships. The code of sustainable relationships emerged which demonstrated how the influence of college staff members make a difference with first-generation college students. Building sustainable relationships may help with the retention of students linking to a transformative practice within higher education. Forming long-lasting bonds with first-generation college students is an integral part of the role of college staff members. Mentoring initiatives were reported as having an impact with the learners. Understanding the personal and professional needs is a key component with forming sustainable relationships.

Cultural competence. The cultural competence code was developed from recognizing the need for college staff members to build cultural awareness for first-generation college students in the programs. Cultural competence is an integral part of transformative practices for the assimilation of first-generation college students into higher education. Cultural competence sets forth the practices of incorporating cultural differences throughout the college environment. Creating more equitable experiences for first-generation college students was acknowledged as a key component. Providing the learners with college staff members who lived through the experience as first-generation college students is crucial for the students.

4. Discussion

4.1 Research Discussion

Poor retention rates cost colleges $14.5 billion a year (Poynton & Lapan, 2017). A third of first-generation college students are more likely to drop out within the first three years, compared to 26% of non-first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018). College staff members work collectively to increase retention rates for learners (Wolf et al., 2017). Postsecondary students face many academic, psychological, sociocultural, and financial challenges when transitioning to college (Radunzel, 2017). Without the proper resources for specific needs, learners drop out of school. The problem addressed in this qualitative case study was students are not getting the proper support from faculty, administrators, and advisors in understanding the needs of first-generation college students (Manyanga et al., 2017). Although support programs are in place for first-generation college students, focus on the clarity of the effectiveness of support programs for a more comprehensive approach for first-generation college students is needed (Whitley et al., 2018). Comprehensive support programs should address issues of equity and social justice to create a sense of belonging for first-generation college students (Means & Pyne, 2017).

Minimal research has linked the needs of first-generation college students and a comprehensive framework which can provide the social and educational commitment from higher education to support the learners with assimilation and retention in college (Connolly, 2016). The shift in focus from institutional demands to the obligation to recognize the challenges of the students was addressed in the

literature (Swift et al., 2019). The challenges of first-generation college students, the need for comprehensive support, as well as the importance of increasing retention rates were noted in Tinto's student retention theory (Connolly, 2016). As referenced in the literature review, transformational leadership theory demonstrated leaders can empower others to create positive change.

4.1.1 Limitations

The study's limitations included purposive sampling and time constraints. This exploratory case study used purposive sampling instead of random sampling, and the results could not be easily applied to a larger population. Purposive sampling may provide a more selective perspective from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Time was another factor, with the data being produced within a three-month time frame, which limits the parameters of the study. Limitations to credibility were controlled using member checking and triangulation. Transferability of the results can easily occur from other first-generation college students, faculty, administrators, advisors, or counselors in higher education. The credibility of the study is absolute due to the participants being well informed of the study. Limitations existed with the cross-participant make-up of the focus groups. The focus groups were comprised of 15 participants which included first-generation college students, administrators, and an advisor. The focus group participants were afforded sufficient space and time for micro-dynamics of power to be performed within the discussion to allow valuable insights (Ayrton, 2019).

4.1.2 Implications for Future Research

Studies related to parents without a college degree and how families may receive support from higher education institutions and be supportive of first-generation students are recommended. The desire for first-generation college students to develop supportive relationships to help with feelings of inferiority and a sense of belonging on campus was revealed in the study. Insights from another study could determine whether providing more support to the families of first-generation college students would increase retention of the learners. A second recommendation would be to conduct quantitative studies which may reveal the disparities between race/ethnicity and wealth as factors relating to the retention of higher education students. The importance of social equality as a factor perceived by the students was noted in the study. Linking social inequality to the decreasing retention rates should be included in the study.

The third recommendation is to include an explanatory case study focusing on an existing comprehensive support system and the increase or decrease in retention rates. A specific focus on a particular comprehensive program may lend to underlying causes and preventive measures for an effective comprehensive support program. The conclusion may lead to adapting practices outlined in a comprehensive model for all colleges and universities.

4.1.3 Conclusion

The study's findings confirmed the overall influence of developing supportive relationships between first-generation college students and faculty, administrators, counselors, and advisors to help build student confidence with integration on the college campus. Building trust with college staff members to help build students' confidence throughout the college experience while navigating resources geared toward first-generation college students was confirmed with the findings from the study. Integrating cultural competence throughout the college environment was evident in the findings from the study. Transformational changes were linked to best practices of college staff members to support first-generation college students and were validated throughout the study. The best practices were comprehensive support, sustainable relationships, and cultural competence. Comprehensive support was found in the study to be a critical element to provide the model framework necessary for linking the services for intervention programs with first-generation college students.

The results of the study revealed three overarching themes for each of the three research questions guiding the study. The major theme which emerged through exploring the first research question was collaborative support. Providing integrated support emerged as the major theme for the second research question. Transformative changes emerged as a major theme for the third research question.

The themes emerging from the data may serve as guidance for higher education institutions, leaders, and future leaders of first-generation college students. Participants in the study confirmed the need for comprehensive support programs to support the needs of first-generation college students with integration into higher education. The comprehensive support programs may benefit the higher education industry, leaders in higher education, first-generation college students, and future leaders of the students.

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