Project First-Gen: A Pilot Intervention Study Aimed at Increasing Social Capital of First-Generation College Students

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**CONTEXT OF STUDY**

First-generation college (FGC) students are students whose parents never enrolled in post-secondary education (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Research suggests FGC students are likely to enter college with limited access to information about the college experience. Project First-Gen gave FGC students access to this information. This study analyzed questions undergraduate FGC students had regarding the college experience and ways to succeed in college. Questions (n=115) that 14 undergraduate FGC students asked as part of a 5-month intervention were coded for emerging topics. Of the four topics that arose (academic, personal well-being, bureaucratic operations, and social dynamic), most students had questions regarding bureaucratic operations (i.e., college knowledge learned outside the classroom that is not readily available to FGC students). Since FGC students are twice as likely to drop out before their second year of college as compared to their peers (Choy, 2001), understanding their concerns and consequently increasing their social capital in an informed manner is imperative.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What topics emerged from the questions FGC students asked throughout the intervention?
2. What topic held the highest frequency?

**METHODOLOGY**

Participants (n=23)
- First-generation undergraduate college students
- 87% Latino, 87% Female
- 18-24 years old, all single
- Enrolled full-time at an accredited university in the United States
- 9% Freshmen, 13% Sophomores, 30% Juniors, 26% Seniors, 22% fifth years
- Seventy percent self-reported a high school GPA between 3.0-4.0 and 39% self-reported a high school GPA greater than 4.0

Intervention
- Pre-test/Post-test Survey design
- Duration: 5 months
- Website: projectfirstgen.wordpress.com
  - Restricted to only bloggers and participants
  - Individual username and password required
- Weekly blogs written by first-generation graduate college students
- Undergraduate students read blogs every week and post at least one question on the website

**RESULTS**

- Of the four themes, participants asked a higher number of questions related to "bureaucratic operations" than any other topic ("academic" =28%, "personal well-being" =20%, "bureaucratic operations" =42%, "social dynamic" =4%).

**DISCUSSION**

Cabrera & Padilla (2004) describe how first-generation college students struggle to learn the "culture of college". This study employed FGC students’ voices to explore what areas of the "culture of college" they felt they lacked knowledge about.

Results support previous research suggesting that FGC students, because of their lack of family members and/or individuals who can mentor and support them through the college-going process, lack basic knowledge that can neither be learned in the classroom nor measured through a standardized test.

Further studies should further explore the types of questions and concerns FGC students have regarding their upward mobility in the educational context.

**IMPLICATIONS**

- A push toward understanding and increasing first-generation college students’ social capital should be the next step in research
- This study addresses current gap in literature when analyzing specific types of knowledge FGC students feel they lack
- Similar studies can aid university institutions in understanding and providing a better campus climate for FGC students
- Knowledge can lead to novel and well-informed interventions to reduce attrition rates of FGC students and encouraging upward academic mobility
- Web-based approach can efficiently service a large number of students
  - Not restricted to campus
  - Not restricted to major
  - Low requirements in order to access (internet access required).

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