The First-Generation Student Experience

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May 16, 2012
Q1: Approximately what percent of HSU students are first-generation students?

A. One Quarter
B. One Third
C. One Half
D. Two Thirds
Q2. Which major would a first-generation student be most likely to choose?

A. Music  
B. Business  
C. Mathematics  
D. French
Q3. What is the average 3-year retention rate for first-generation students at HSU over the past ten years?

A. 42%
B. 47%
C. 52%
D. 57%
Q4. The average first-generation student at HSU enrolls in approximately how many units per semester?

A. 9: significantly fewer than the non-FG student
B. 12: slightly fewer than the non-FG student
C. 14: about the same as the non-FG student
D. 16: more than the non-FG student
Q5. Which of the following is the most common reason cited for first-generation students leaving HSU?

A. financial reasons
B. local town and community reasons
C. the HSU community
D. family reasons
Q6. What is the average 6-year graduation rate for first-generation students at HSU over the past decade?

A. 38%
B. 43%
C. 48%
D. 53%
Q7. What is the average number of hours worked each week by first-generation students at Humboldt State?

A. About 17: the same as the non-FG student
B. About 7: much fewer than the non-FG
C. About 12: slightly fewer than the non-FG student
D. About 22: more than the non-FG student
Q8. Compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation students are more likely to

A. live at home.
B. have dependents.
C. be of non-traditional age.
D. all of the above.
First-Generation Students

- HSU Definition: Students that do not have a parent who graduated from college with a baccalaureate degree.
1-Year Retention Rates

10-Year Average:
First-Gen: 72%
Non-FG: 75.6%

First-Gen
Non First-Gen
2-Year Retention Rates

10-Year Average:
First-Gen: 59%
Non-FG: 62%

First-Gen
Non First-Gen
3-Year Retention Rates

10-Year Average:
- First-Gen: 52%
- Non-FG: 58%

First-Gen: 52%
Non-FG: 58%
6-Year Graduation Rates

10-Year Average:
First Gen: 38%
Non-FG: 46%
The Achievement Gap

- One Year Retention
- Two Year Retention
- Three Year Retention
- Six Year Graduation

- Non-First Generation
- First Generation
First-generation students graduate at a significantly lower rate, even when demographics, motivation, academic preparation, academic progress, grade point average, and income are accounted for!
First-Generation Students Are Less Likely to …

- live on campus
- develop relationships with faculty
- perceive faculty as concerned about their development
- develop strong relationships with other students
- become involved in the campus community
- but are More Likely to work (and, on average, work more hours) off campus

Adapted from Pike and Kuh (2005)
First-Generation Challenges

What’s the purpose of it all? What major? Why?

Two Worlds

Career Confusion

Support Structures

Imposter Syndrome

Significant separation from families, who don’t understand college life. Competing obligations.

Sense of belonging.

“College Knowledge.”
Discussion

- What do you think are some of the challenges first-generation students face at HSU?
- What is being done to support these students?
- What can the university community do to promote inclusive success?
- What can you do as an individual?
What HSU Students Have to Say

“This is only my first year but I am very confident about my knowledge of the school due to HOP, YES House, and EOP. I often find myself being a mentor to freshman telling them what is available. Now that I am established here I feel like my only challenges are schoolwork. I no longer feel the burden of being a first generation student.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“I was very confused on how to even apply for college. No one in my family could help so I had to seek outside resources. My family could not relate to me and still do not understand exactly what I am doing at college. When I transferred up here I was truly alone, I lived by myself and I felt like every day was a new learning experience...I really wanted to embrace University life, but had a hard time making friends/connections.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“HSU has given me so many opportunities but it has been up to me to apply myself and participate in my college experience”
“Feeling motivated to stay in school and deciding on a major. Sometimes I feel discouraged because of how expensive school is and how much debt I will be in later as well as the fact that my degree may not even get me a job. I’m trying to feel like I fit in here and that I love what I’m doing within my major but it’s hard. Sometimes I feel stuck.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“The environment of learning and being surrounded by motivated people in the same program as me has strengthened my resolve to go forward to my goal.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“We emphasize that faculty and staff are small and close-knit but really most faculty and staff couldn’t give you the time of day.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“I feel that me going to college allows for my siblings back home to have the same opportunity as me. I would like them to learn the independence and community that is in college.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“I was always surrounded by so many siblings and people back home, it has been hard for me to care for myself.”
“As a first generation student, being granted the opportunity to attend an institute far away from home has been marvelous. My experience has been so positive because of the many resources offered here and off-campus. I never really received that back at home (L.A.) so I hold the community here near and dear to my heart.”
What HSU Students Have to Say

“One of the toughest challenges for me is to manage academics as successfully as possible. I’ve struggled with basic college-level skills and this has made me feel insecure about my level of intelligence. In addition, I’ve struggled to establish solid friendships where I can have a support system. I’ve struggled with self-care and making time for myself.”
“I am a first-generation, low-income, and transfer student. I honestly believed college was out of my reach my entire life so being able to move far away and attend HSU was a remarkable achievement.”
Discussion Revisited

- What do you think are some of the challenges first-generation students face at HSU?
- What is being done to support these students?
- What can the university community do to promote inclusive success?
- What can you do as an individual?
Outside of the classroom

• Social integration
• Intensive, holistic support services
• Forming authentic relationships between students and staff
• Recognizing and celebrating diversity

Targeting First-Generation Students @ U of I

http://www.counselingcenter.illinois.edu/?page_id=142
Inside the classroom

• Improve Student Engagement
• Ensure that students form relationships with faculty and feel appreciated as individuals
• Clarify expectations & explanations
• Provide support and explain available resources
• Focus on improving reading comprehension, critical thinking, and mathematical abilities

Targeting First-Generation Students @ Portland State
http://www.sfss.pdx.edu/main.php?doc_id=1
Happening Elsewhere

University of Southern California:
First-Generation College Student Mentor Program (Career Center)

Students will be paired with USC alumni who also were first generation college students. These mentors will guide students as they explore the concerns or challenges they face as a first generation college student at USC.
Colorado State University: First-Gen Faculty Outreach Group (Academic Affairs)

Faculty volunteers aid the institution in enrolling and supporting first-gen students by reviewing enrollment/retention data or hosting lunches for students. Also delivered radio spot, highlighting the faculty mentors available to first-generation students: "My name is X, I teach biology at CSU, and I was a first-generation student."
San Jose State University: First-Gen Stress Management Workshop (Counseling Center)

Come learn how to better manage your stress so that you can focus on your academics.

San Jose State University: Family Night for First-Gen College Students (Counseling Center, Cross-Cultural Center, & Student Affairs)

A place for students and their families to discuss the college experience and increase sources of support.
The First-Generation Student Experience: Implications for Campus Practice, and Strategies for Improving Persistence and Success, by Jeff Davis

Recommendations from the text
Recommendations from the text:

THEME: Learning at College

1. Focus on Remedial Courses
   a. Rotate course assignments so that full-time & tenure-track faculty also teach
   b. Limit class size of these classes

2. Provide Study Skill Instruction
   a. Faculty should teach (and be trained to teach) study skills in courses with high 1st & 2nd yr student enrollment
   b. Offer first-gen-specific study skill workshops
   c. Mandate study skill workshops for under-performing students in their 1st, 2nd, or 3rd years (non-punitive)
Recommendations from the text:

THEME: Learning at College

3. Placement in Study Groups (Supplemental Instruction)
   a. “Making an activity voluntary rather than mandatory will result in many students not attending—often those students who would benefit most from the activity”
   b. Center them on peer mentoring and study group leaders, who model behaviors and organize content

4. Specialized academic advising
   a. Allow for first-gen students to take longer to choose majors and have different selection criteria
   b. Require more regular and longer advising sessions
Recommendations from the text
THEME: Campus Presence

1. Help overcome the “imposter phenomenon”
   a. Train faculty and staff to recognize the imposter phenomenon and increase classroom participation.
   b. Transparency of classroom procedures: how papers are formatted and turned in; how to prepare for and what to expect from office hours, etc.
   c. Legitimize the feeling. Faculty and staff can share their own experiences and discuss the normalcy.

2. Mandatory enrollment in a “University 101” course
   a. Strong balance of student life and academics.
   b. “FG students can be skeptical of institutional initiatives that appear to be outside academic goals & purposes.”
Recommendations from the text

THEME: Campus Presence

3. Model the life of the mind
   a. Model academic discourse & disagreement
   b. Host weekly or monthly demonstrations, open lectures, and department colloquiums
   c. Involve students with associated duties & behaviors, e.g., scholarly article writing or daily functions of depts.
Recommendations from the text
THEME: Extended Campus Acclimation Process

1. Pre-registration orientation to campus
   a. Special sessions dedicated to FG students & families

2. Help students persist and resist pressures from home
   a. Multiple mandatory meetings with advisors
   b. Peer group meetings that address homesickness
   c. On-campus housing payment assistance to encourage every FG student to live on-campus
Recommendations from the text

THEME: Extended Campus Acclimation Process

3. Involvement in campus life
   a. Monitor event advertisements and procedures for exclusionary ideology.
   b. Pascarella, et al. (2004): “First-generation students derived greater outcome benefits from extracurricular involvement and peer interaction than other students even though they were significantly less likely to be engaged in these activities.”
   c. Offer more on-campus and work-study employment.

4. Provide unstructured, informal FG public spaces
   a. Validate and support open spaces for students.
1. Relationships with faculty & staff
   a. Developing relationships with a faculty member is highly correlated with academic success
   b. Host department-sponsored meet & greets as well as academically-oriented events
   c. Ensure that faculty members hold regular office hours

2. Advancement of personal relationships at home
   a. Send materials home to families describing the FG experience.

3. FG students need role models
   a. Arrange student mentor programs & network opportunities
For Further Reading


