



First Generation College Students and Disability: Assistance with College Experience

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ABSTRACT

First-generation college students (FGCS) experience a unique social, cultural, and personal dynamic affecting their college experience and academic success. Being an FGCS with a disability entitles dual categories that reflect multiple challenges and needs. Because students affairs professional play a key role in academic success, this paper aims to identify challenges, support, and strengths of FGCS with and without disability. Understanding the experience of these student groups improve social equity and support opportunities for social mobility.

Keywords: College students, disability, higher education, university

FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND DISABILITY

The number of first-generation college students (FGCS), who are the first one to attain a college degree in their families, is steadily increasing. In fact, over 30 percent of college students in the United States are considered first generation college students (United States Department of Education, 2014). For any traditional age college student, it can be challenging transitioning from high school to the college environment. College students face numerous challenges and uncertainty, which are often even more challenging for FGCS due to the unique aspects and attributes of this group (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). For first-generation college students, navigate a new learning environment and new cultural environment, and sometimes lack guidance and support from family in how to navigate this new and different cultural environment (Irlbeck et al., 2014). Difficulty with college navigation combine with inadequate university support, FGCS may struggle to reach their full potential and enjoy their college experience.

Along with an upsurge in enrollment of FGCS, many colleges and universities have also enrolled large numbers of students with disabilities (Chen, 2005). College students with

disabilities have lower retention rates, take longer to complete degrees, and have lower degree completion rates than students without disabilities (Wessel et al., 2009). Young adults with disabilities tend to have greater difficulty adjusting to community life, employment opportunities, and postsecondary settings than young adults without disabilities (Kim & Lee, 2015). Although transition planning has been part of secondary age students with disabilities since the 1980s, a large percentage of this student population continues to enter postsecondary institutions with inadequate preparation to overcome the unique challenges they face in their adult lives (McCall, 2015). The college environment can also be overwhelming and difficult to navigate and FGCS might lack awareness of the various helpful campus resources for assistance to efficaciously navigate the college environment and complex cultural system of colleges and universities.

Even though FGCS with and without disabilities continue to enroll in colleges and universities, student affairs professionals working with these groups of students could enhance their practices by learning about their needs, creating opportunities for success, and advocating for institutional changes. Previous research has identified slight progress in terms of the education of college students with disabilities indicating an urgent need to improve institutional commitment for support services, provide decision making prospects for students, and promote barrier-free educational programs (Vickerman & Blundell, 2010). Because FGCS also have high levels of academic motivation (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021), student affairs professional play a pivotal role to support student preparation and success among these students with and without disabilities.

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READINESS FOR COLLEGE

FGCS often have attended high schools with lower academic standards and have less academic preparation compared to students whose parents attended college (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). When it comes to academics, colleges and universities have offered remedial courses at a growing rate indicating that more students than ever before are not academically ready for college (Porter & Polikoff, 2012). The growing number of remedial courses suggests that high schools are not always doing an adequate job in preparing students for the expectations of college courses and instructors. Additionally, FGCS often lack time management and study skills (Irlbeck et al., 2014) and students with disabilities experience insufficient transition planning while in secondary school (Gill, 2007) which are essential for student success in college. FGCS, with and without disabilities, often lack proper educational preparation before attending college shaping their potential academic readiness.

While more students with disabilities are enrolling in college, it is important to note that students with disabilities are more likely to avoid postsecondary studies, work lower paying jobs, and being unemployed or underemployed than peers without disabilities (Gordon et al., 2014). FGCS may also not realize the resources available on campus that can assist them in being successful (Katreovich, & Aruguete, 2017) and may be reluctant to meet with faculty to discuss academic issues (Schwartz et al., 2018). Students with disabilities often experience similar obstacles accessing campus resources and connecting with faculty (Moriña, 2019). Furthermore, young adults with disabilities often lack self-advocacy skills needed to advocate for services and required supports to be successful in postsecondary environments (Perry et al., 2015). Therefore, FGCS with disabilities may lack proper skills to navigate a new school environment with proper support and knowledge. These students could benefit from having supports that create transformative experiences during college.

Gibbons, Rhinehart and Hardin (2019) indicated that FGCS were not ready for the profound and personal transformative experiences that often occurs in college. This made adjustment to college difficult due to feelings of unrealistic expectations and beliefs that college prepare one for a career and be similar in nature to high school. Many students with disabilities, who are FGCS, lack proper skills to overcome academic and social challenges as well as struggle adjusting to college life and demands. Previous research has shown that youth with disabilities from minoritized ethnic groups are unsuccessful in college (Trainor, 2008). College can become overwhelming for FGCS with disabilities as they may misconstrued expectations about college and may lack needed abilities. Students might not expect to have to handle differences in opinions and may struggle with conflict resolution skills and relating to other students from vastly different backgrounds.

INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL FACTORS INFLUENCING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE

First generation college students bring diverse backgrounds that shape their college journey. FGCS often are minority students who come from a lower SES backgrounds and may be older than other college students (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). They are also more likely to be married, have children, and work at least part time than non-FGCS (Huynh, 2019). These factors can create additional challenges to college success and familiarity with college environments. Personal characteristics and environmental factors affect students with disabilities' academic ability and intellectual confidence upon entering college (Kim & Kutscher, 2020). Ethnic minority students and students with disabilities have a diminished quality of post-school outcomes (Skiba et al., 2005). Therefore, FGCS, with and without disability, tend to navigate multiple intersections that impact their college experience as well as opportunities to connect to their campus community.

FGCS might not feel like they quite fit into the university setting due to their status as first generation and they might then isolate and have low self-esteem issues (Gibbons et al., 2019). Click, Huang, and Kline, (2017) also reported that FGCS are more likely to drop out of college after the first year and less likely to complete their degrees than non-FGCS. Moreover, FGCS may believe that the needs of the individual are often secondary to the needs of the family (Katreovich & Aruguete, 2017) making them less inclined to seek assistance when struggling with college. Herbert et al. (2014) concluded that less than 20% of student with disabilities self-identified with a disability office and sought supports upon post-secondary enrollment. Because FGCS, with and without disabilities, may feel out of place and may lack a sense of belonging on campus, they may be reluctant to seek services, identify as an FGCS, or embrace any other parts of their identities.

Since FGCS often have multiple financial responsibilities, many FGCS struggle with finances, sometimes more frequently than other students (Jenkins et al., 2013.) including how to properly manage it (Gibbons et al., 2019). The cost of a college education has increased substantially over the last few decades becoming harder to secure finances for tuition (Herndon, 2012). For some FGCS figuring out and navigating the financial aid process can be difficult and they may struggle with understanding how loans work (Gibbons et al., 2019). This can contribute to on-going stress and worrying about being able to afford college and pay basic living expenses. Similarly, students with disabilities deal with higher education who are misinformed on disabilities (Hong, 2015), along with discrimination in securing employment while attending college and additional expenses (Eichelberger, Mattioli, & Foxhove, 2017). FGCS with disability are more likely to come from low-income families leading to higher financial stress levels than for continuing generation students with disabilities (Lombardi et al., 2012).

While research is limited on differences in familial social support among students with disabilities, prior findings among first-generation students indicated that these students reported lower levels of financial and emotional support from families than do continuing-generation students (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Among students with disabilities, those with higher levels of perceived social support are better equipped to describe their needs related to disclosing their disability, self-advocating, and requesting accommodations (Frawley & Bigby, 2015; Troiano, 2003). Moreover, FGCS are more likely to express a disconnect between themselves and their families following the transition to postsecondary school in part due to a deviation between home and institutional cultures (Bryan & Simmons, 2009). Adjusting to college is not easy for any student and the need to make meaningful connections impacts adjustment to personal and collegial experiences.

For FGCS, with and without disabilities, personal experiences and environmental forces influence their educational experiences. These student may lack a sense of belonging to the institution, feel weak support at their university, and have poor academic preparation (Longwell-Grice, Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2016). In fact, the unique challenges that FGCS face put them at a higher risk compared to other students for mental health problems, along with higher dropout rates (House, Neal, & Kolb, 2020). In college characteristics, on-campus living, full time enrollment, first-year GPA, and net price of attendance are significant predictors of students with disabilities in higher education (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2010). Consequently, FGCS depend on academic advisors and college administrators to properly navigate the institution (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013) and provide support needed for academic success.

IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTIONS AND CHALLENGES

There have been numerous research studies linking college student success to making connections with peers, faculty, and staff. The importance of making meaningful connections and the impact these connections and experiences have on college student success has been noted in several studies (Fischer, 2007). Students with disabilities can improve their collegial experience by having a sense of belonging and connection to environment (Willis, 2007). During the college years, there are numerous opportunities for connections with others to be made from involvement in student activities to just making friends by connecting with fellow students on campus. For FGCS it is important to have a strong sense of community and this requires connecting with others on campus including peers (Nunez, 2011). However, finding time to do so can be a challenge due to other familial and social obligations.

Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) reported FGCS having difficulty finding the time to meet with faculty and to be involved in campus activities due to other responsibilities such as work and family. Additionally, many FGCS tended to save money by attending colleges or universities within driving distance from home regardless of whether the college was the

best fit (Grace-Odeleye & Santiago, 2019). Other FGCS travel home every weekend due to needing to help out with family obligations and experience guilt while at college knowing their families back home struggle (Wheeler, 2016). These are additional factors that contribute to the lack of involvement in campus activities on the part of FGCS. These numerous factors create additional barriers to making connections with others on campus. In addition to making connections with people on campus, family relationships and family support can play a vital role in college student success (Metheny & McWhirter, 2013).

FGCS have been also found to have less social and family support while in college which can contribute to higher levels of depression and higher dropout rates than other student populations (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). The families of FGCS, with and without disabilities may not fully understand the time and emotional demands of college and may not provide significant support to the FGCS. Lack of family support has been linked to lower levels of academic performance and can contribute to on-going stress (Metheny & McWhirter, 2013). For FGCS additional stress can lead to fatigue, increased stress levels, contribute to depression and ultimately lead to burnout and students dropping out of college. Trying to balance academics, a job and other obligations can become overwhelming for some students impacting their ability to successfully complete college courses.

IMPLICATION FOR STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS

Student affairs professionals need to understand the unique challenges of FGCS with and without disabilities. Even though a growing number of FGCS are attending colleges, many are not prepared for college in ways that go beyond the classroom. Thus, they are at risk for not successfully completing a college degree and experience environmental factors that do not foster success in college (Eveland, 2020). These students often face unique challenges and obstacles that need to be addressed to move forward and succeed in college. Additionally, FGCS with and without disabilities, may struggle with fitting in and finding a sense of belonging leading to a potential increment in the risk of dropping out. To help this population, it is important for student affairs professionals to find ways to meet the needs of these students in a cost-effective manner while considering the dual identities: first-generation college student and having a disability. Because FGCS with disabilities face unique personal challenges and struggle with adjustment to college, student affairs professionals working in disability services areas could identify ways to enhance student engagement, promote self-advocacy skills along with providing opportunities for skills development.

GROUPS: A MECHANISM FOR STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

A strong sense of belonging, community support, and appropriate institutional services can help to maintain student engagement among FGCS (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). For FGCS, who may feel isolated by their status, a support group represent an opportunity to connect with others who share similar

challenges and concerns. Additionally, the group can offer a chance to help work through relationship and personal issues. A group to share challenges and successes could be greatly beneficial for students struggling to adapt to college as FGCS with or without disabilities. Finding the time to attend group may be a limiting factor for some but on-going support may outweigh this challenge. A support group can be preventative in nature in terms of helping new students to connect, address issues and gain needed support.

The challenge for the college or university wanting to implement a support group might be the reluctance of FGCS to seek assistance. These students may also not believe they need assistance until they are academically struggling, and, in some cases, it might be too late. Part of being able to effectively implement a support group program requires a detailed plan of action and reduction of the stigma often associated with asking for assistance. Making students aware of the group option early can be advantageous along with enlisting the support of students who have attended the group. For example, students who have completed their first year successfully can afford on-going support and become mentors for new students. Another way to address feelings of isolation is to educate both faculty and staff about the resources and supports on campus for FGCS with and without disabilities.

Because a sense of belonging operates at personal and daily levels, student affairs professionals need to work at multiple levels to enhance student engagement and retention (Gillen-O'Neel, 2021). Professionals need to be sensitive to cultural norms of group members who may not attend a group that is labeled as a support group. The perception of seeking assistance in some cultures can be negative leading to underutilized services (Sun et al., 2016). Moreover, student affairs professionals must consider the academic culture of the university and how it supports students' behavioral engagement in response to personal values (Ryan & Deci, 2000). To help FGCS, with or without a disability, the use of group can be beneficial. Even during the pandemic and virtual learning, groups using video telephony services can help these students to move forward and adjust better to the college setting.

SELF-ADVOCACY: A SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILL

Another important area of development for FGCS with and without disabilities is: self-advocacy. Haas and Phinney (2013) suggested that self-advocacy skills contribute to building rapport and relationship creation with instructional staff as well as to developing support system on campuses, increasing tutorial participation, and utilizing offices that offer support to students. However, as previously noted some students lack self-advocacy skills and need assistance in learning to develop this vital skill. Self-advocacy creates feeling of empower that promotes a sense of self-direction, control over the environment, and ideas sharing.

Knotek (2019) indicated that self-advocacy impacts a student's ability to plan and then execute academic goals. Students can create a voice for themselves while expressing

their needs and identifying ways to meet those needs. At the same time as students learn to advocate, students can become more comfortable within the college culture, establish connections with others, and advance the rights of individuals. By developing self-advocacy skills, FGCS with and without disabilities can facilitate their degree attainment by finding solution to some of their challenges, learning about resources on campus, and increasing a sense of belonging.

Self-advocacy can also act as a catalyst for social inclusion (Frawley & Bigby, 2015) creating spaces for students with disabilities to express concerns and needs to university staff and faculty. By understanding their personal role in success in college, FGCS with and without disability could feel more connected to their educational goals and place more value on their educational efforts and decisions. Furthermore, students learn how to advocate for themselves and others not only in college settings but in other parts of their lives. Advocacy and self-advocacy are important lifelong skills that contribute to success beyond postsecondary education.

TRAINING: SUPPORTS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

There are additional life-long skills that FGCS with and without disabilities can learn in college and through support groups. Training for faculty and staff regarding how to better serve FGCS can be implemented along with mentorship programs (peer and faculty/student). Student affairs offices could include educational information regarding services available on campus as well as allow for an opportunity for students to share experiences and provide on-going support in a caring and nurturing environment. Students could help to determine topics, but appropriate topics may include working on time management and financial management skills. Furthermore, educational group opportunities could support connection among students while facilitating social skills development to connect with other students. Another area of topics could be learning about campus resources, campus activities and organizations.

FGCS students tend to struggle juggling university and job due to financial obligations (Petty, 2014), thus, student affairs professionals need to identify supports to sustain FGCS motivation for degree completion. Although FGCS with and without disabilities navigate different risk factors, universities and colleges can promote resilience in these groups. Providing tools to support their goal-oriented behaviors to finish their degree can motivate FGCS to successfully graduate from college. In addition, student affairs services can provide mental health services and resources for these students to alleviate the potential impact of low self-esteem, stress, and poor coping skills (Petty, 2014). Groups offer the perfect opportunity for students to learn and practice coping skills and social networking skills. Additionally, groups can provide a needed support in that students realize they are not alone in their struggles.

FGCS with disabilities face unique challenges shaping education related decisions, college success, and career choice.

For student affairs staff working with students with disabilities, educating students about their educational rights could positively influence their collegial experience. Accommodations for students with disabilities, including test and assignment accommodations, could influence academic performance (Kim & Lee, 2015). Even though many FGCS do not live on campus, university services could still create spaces welcoming to these students as well as information sessions for new students. Student affairs professionals and college administrators, in the disability services and other offices, need to create support for these students with dual challenges that could tarnish academic success.

Furthermore, these dual inter sectionality, FGCS and disability, could be further shaped by additional identity pieces that also modify the experience of college students. McCallen and Johnson (2020) pointed out social equity demands that underrepresented students are provided with the tools they need to succeed in college. While students with disabilities are a higher rate of not graduating than students without disabilities, there are a few colleges and universities for which the graduation rate is equal (Kutscher & Tuckwiller, 2019). Thus, student affairs and university administrators must identify and develop ways to support FGCS with and without in higher education. While programs are beneficial, they only work when students know about them and utilize them. To increase the utilization of programs and support services, student affairs professionals must make them relevant, meaningful, and beneficial.

CONCLUSION

The fact is that the number of FGCS continues to increase and there are significant income gaps between those who earn a degree and those who merely attend college (Eveland, 2020). Student affairs professionals and campus administrators need to provide services specific to FGCS that understand unique social, cultural, educational, and financial factors. FGCS with and without disabilities often face additional challenges and issues as they attempt to navigate and figure out the college or university setting. To this end, universities resources need to be reallocated to address the needs of underserved students including FGCS (McCallen & Johnson, 2020). This needs to be done in a systematic way that results in changes to the university creating an environment where FGCS feel comfortable, can gain the skills they need to succeed, and receive on-going commitment. Increasing education equity among marginalized groups leads to better opportunities for FGCS with and without disabilities while promoting inclusion and students' rights.

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