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Supporting First-Generation Students

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Abstract

First-generation college students represent a significant portion of individuals seeking higher education in the United States; yet this population does not perform as well academically as continuing generation peers. Significant research exists exploring barriers preventing college attainment for this population; however, there is limited research recommending targeted interventions in formative years to prepare first-generation students for college life. School counselors play a critical role in helping to bridge this gap by focusing on social-emotional learning.

Introduction

Over the past three decades, in response to the increasingly demanding economy, employers require applicants to obtain postsecondary education and/or complete formal training programs. For example, employers in the technology field are directing their employees to expand their knowledge and skill base aligning with the improvements and advancements in the field (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). These progressions will only continue in the future, requiring more students to obtain higher education after high school. The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts jobs requiring at least some postsecondary education will grow by 80% in the next

four years (Richards & Terkianian, 2013). Furthermore, more high school students are understanding the benefits of earning a postsecondary education. Benefits including greater career opportunities, higher socioeconomic status and various health benefits (Schafer, Wilkinson, & Ferraro, 2013). Social benefits include lower mental health concerns and an overall greater sense of control (Schafer, Wilkinson, & Ferraro, 2013). Unfortunately, accessing higher education may not be equally distributed among people in the United States' population.

To take case in point, students identifying as low socioeconomic status, students of color, and first-generation college students are underrepresented in bachelor degree programs at colleges and universities (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). In the present article, the authors use Stebleton and Soria's (2012) definition of first-generation college students "...as neither parent having earned a bachelor's degree; the same definition is used by federal TRIO programs and other organizations" (p.7). A clear education gap between first-generation students and students whose parent(s) attended college exists (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Specifically, 47% of students whose parent(s) did not attend college did not enroll in any postsecondary institution after graduating high school (Engle et al., 2006). Conversely, 85% of students whose parent(s) earned a college degree did attend college after high school graduation (Engle et al., 2006). This disparaging gap between first-generation students and their peers suggest first generation students face specific barriers obstructing college attainment.

First-generation college students face barriers beyond their peers stemming from

academic challenges presented early on in their educational career (Stebleton & Soria, 2012). First-generation students commonly identify as low socioeconomic status, minorities and overall have an absence of home support. First-generation students lack their parent(s)'s first-hand knowledge and experience as compared to their peers with college going parent(s). First-generation students are not taught how to identify appropriate colleges, apply to post-secondary programs, financially pay for tuition/find financial aid, keep up with academic rigor and navigate the social norms at a collegiate level (Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). Moreover, barriers for first-generation students persist despite first-generation students enrolling in post-secondary education programs. Therefore, early interventions beginning in elementary school targeting first-generation students' specific barriers are necessary to support first generation students' post-secondary achievement.

School counselors are equipped to support college access and promote success for first-generation college students. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) requires school counselors to provide college awareness beginning in elementary school (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). During these formative years, school counselors may cultivate a college and career-ready culture within their school, promoting college-going attitudes and beliefs through intentional programming (Dockery & McKelvey, 2013). Much of the current research focuses on the academic advising aspect of college and career readiness. However, there is little research concerning social and emotional guidance and support for first-generation college students. Social and emotional learning (SEL) promotes engagement in learning,

positivity, mental health, and academic performance in a K-12 setting and beyond. (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). In fact, Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, (2008) suggest social and emotional learning increases graduation rates, readiness for postsecondary life, positive relationships, and overall success in future careers.

The following article will review literature related to barriers first-generation college students face, social emotional learning, and programs and interventions to address social emotional learning for first-generation college students. The authors propose specific interventions targeting first-generation college students' social emotional learning, self-efficacy and resiliency skills including individual counseling, small groups, school-wide initiatives, and collaboration with stakeholders. Parents, an integral stakeholder group, also need support and guidance related to the higher education process for their child. The proposed interventions provide first-generation students with a wrap-around, holistic approach to college and career readiness. School counselors, leaders and advocates, are called to increase efforts for first-generation students by providing social and emotional support through concrete interventions.

Literature Review Who are First-Generation College Students?

Defining the term first-generation college students continues to cause debate among scholars and in current literature. This controversy over definition of first-generation college students greatly impacts the percentages of students categorized in this group, in turn affecting college-going

and college-attainment rates (Toutkoushian, Stollberg & Slaton, 2015). Toutkoushian et al. (2015) uses eight different measures to identify first-generation college students: "(1) parent(s) have at most a high school degree; (2) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) an associate's degree; (3) parent(s) have at most completed an associate's degree; (4) parent(s) have at most started (but not completed) a bachelor's degree" (p. 12). Each of the four measures had two variables depending on whether both or only one parent needed to meet the education criteria (Toutkoushian et. al, 2015). When the researchers broke apart the definition of first-generation college students, the rate of inclusion varied from 22% at the most restrictive definition to 77%, when information for at least one parent was used (Toutkoushian et al. (2015). Alternatively, The United State Department of Education interprets first-generation status in at least three different ways: the legislative definition (no parent in the household has a bachelor's degree) and the two used for research: no education after high school; no degree after high school (Sharpe, 2017). The inconsistency with definitions across different fields leads to an incomplete depiction of the unique challenges this population faces. Specifically, the varying definitions, makes designing effective programs and interventions more difficult. Additionally, first-generation college students often belong to other at-risk groups such as low socioeconomic homes; and a greater percentage of Black and Hispanic students comprise the first-generation college student profile than their counterparts (Redford & Hoyer, 2017).

Barriers to Success

Redford and Hoyer (2017) report, based on data collected from the National Center

for Education Statistics, approximately 24% of college enrollees are first-generation students: where neither parent participated in post-secondary education. Furthermore, on GPA comparisons alone, only 33% of first-generation students have a GPA of 3.0 or better compared to 56% of their continuing generation peers (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Data indicates first-generation students are less likely to obtain a degree. Forty-seven percent of first-generation college students enrolling in post-secondary institutions do not complete a certificate program or higher, compared to 30% of continuing generation peers. Additionally, only 33% of first-generation students completing an associate's or bachelor's degree program when compared to 50% of continuing generation peers (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). The disparity between first-generation and continuing generation students is cause for concern. The "American Dream" is lauded as an achievable standard in the United States for anyone regardless of race, ethnicity or family socioeconomic status, if an individual is willing to work hard. However, the existing inequalities between students belonging to different minorities or subgroups creates multiple barriers for these groups. Therefore, additional support and interventions must be done to assist students in overcoming obstacles.

The transition from high school to post-secondary institutions may be very stressful for all students (Parker, Hogan, Eastabrook, Oke & Wood, 2006). DeAngelo and Franke (2016) found college retention after the first year varied depending on college readiness, defined as "having a B+ or better high school GPA" and having completed: four years of English, three years of math, two years of a foreign language, three years of science including a biology and physical

science and one year of history/government and one year of arts (as cited in Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Cataldi, Bennett, and Chen (2018), report first-generation college students are less than half as likely as their peers to enroll in an academically focused curriculum in high school or Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate classes. This lack of more challenging classes indicates first-generation college students are not as "college-ready" and are more likely to withdraw after the first year. There is a great emphasis on high school grade-point average, test scores and academic performance as a predictor of college success. The importance of social emotional learning (SEL) on academic achievement is well documented, however, SEL remains a relatively new concept. The association between social and emotional learning impacting first-generation college students' success in postsecondary education is not well researched.

Social Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning, conceptualized in its current form in 1994 by Daniel Goleman and collaborators of the research organization Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Maughan, 2018). The mission of CASEL is "to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning an integral part of education from preschool through high school" (www.casel.org). CASEL identifies five core competencies of social and emotional learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making. Research indicates for students exposed to SEL programs their academic achievement was higher and sustained for approximately 3.5 years beyond participation in the SEL program (Maughan, 2018). Parker et al. (2004)

also found emotional intelligence as a significant predictor of academic success. Alvarado, Spatariu and Woodbury (2017) found first-generation college students had lower levels of emotional intelligence, but higher levels of resilience than continuing generation students. Parker, Summerfeldt, Hogan and Majeski (2004) report when high school GPA, age and course load were controlled, the first-generation students scoring significantly higher than their peers on emotional intelligence scales at the beginning of the academic term were more academically successful. The five components of social and emotional learning correlate to various behaviors necessary for success in college life. For example, relationship skills like resisting inappropriate social pressure or seeking help, may be of value to first-generation students adapting to college culture lacking seasoned and knowledgeable advice of trusted adults and parents (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013).

Hsiao (1992) states one of the major social obstacles impeding first-generation students is assimilating into the college culture while maintaining original relationships existing outside of this community. First-generation students may benefit from finding balance between their familiar world and the college going world. A balance often complicated by first-generation student's inability to truly immerse themselves in college life (Phinney, Dennis & Osorio, 2006). More first-generation students enroll as part-time students than their counterparts (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). As detailed by the National Center for Education Statistics 48% of first-generation students enrolled part-time (2014). Part-time students, often working jobs, own familial responsibilities and are less able to access campus

resources such as career centers, tutoring centers and extracurricular activities through student centers (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). This lack of socialization with like-minded peers perpetuates the isolation experienced by first-generation students and inhibits their ability to make necessary personal connections with peers from different backgrounds. However, effective social and emotional programming throughout the formative school years, particularly as students reach high school and begin the transition to college life could prove particularly helpful.

The Role of the School Counselor

School counselors are tasked with providing academic, career and personal/social development of students (ASCA, 2012). A continued push for counselors is a way to incorporate student standards into content curriculum and the classrooms where students spend most of their time. Social and emotional learning, proven effective in increasing academic achievement, should comprehensively and proactively aim to support all students. Aligning with the ASCA National Model, SEL programs are not reactively designed (Van Velsor, 2009). Elias et al. (1997) describes three components of effective social and emotional learning: (1.) formal and informal training throughout the school years, (2.) school climate promoting safe social and emotional development, (3.) and stakeholders actively involved in supporting social emotional learning (educators, parents and community leaders). The field of education aligns high academic achievement with success; however, counselors, advocates and leaders, need to highlight the benefits of social emotional learning. SEL promotes and impacts increasing academic achievement and prosocial behaviors contributing to the psychological health of

individual students, the school and society (Van Velsor, 2009; Durlak et al. 2011). Elias, Zins, Graczyk and Weissberg (2003) warns against schools primarily focusing on standardized test scores and academic achievement. The researchers ascertain social emotional learning effectively support gains in academic achievement, in addition to increasing emotional intelligence. Further, SEL programs intend to impact prosocial behaviors, better decision making, and taking responsibility for one's self (Durlak et al. 2011). Ample research highlights the overall benefits of social and emotional learning. However, curricula in schools, including higher education, is lacking. Moreover, little research exists specifically focusing on advantages of teaching social emotional skills to high school students and their parents, in preparation for college and/or career success beyond high school. Durlak et al. (2011) found social emotional programs effectively address all levels of education, elementary through high school; however, minimal research exists on high schools. Teaching social and emotional skills, not as a short-term intervention/program, but rather conceptualized longitudinally supports the development of skills beginning in early elementary years and continually growing, building upon teachings and expectations from year to year. The specific strategies and skills students are expected to learn should be age appropriate ensuring when students graduate, they are equipped with the social and emotional skills necessary to be successful in college life and not hindered by their non-generational status. Research by Demetriou, Meece, Eeaker-Rich and Powell (2017) focused on the characteristics of successful first-generation college students, in turn allowing for a clearer depiction of necessary skills this population needs to obtain when in college

to affect retention rates and successful degree completion. A limitation of this research is the small sample size and the backgrounds of each participant was not analyzed to indicate a representative sample of their own group, these findings illustrate campus initiatives positively impacting first-generation students (Demetriou et al. 2017).

Pike and Kuh (2005) found first-generation students were less engaged, hypothesizing these students know less about the importance of engagement and lack skills in this area. Of significance, Yang and Bear (2018) report the teacher-student relationship at the student level has the strongest main effect on emotional engagement and is stronger in middle and high school. This supports the findings from Demetriou et al. (2017) on the impact of more experiences peer, faculty mentor or other adult in the lives of successful first-generation college students. The ability of first-generation students to make new relationships, particularly in an environment where they already feel out of place is tantamount to their ability to be successful, highlighting the important work of social and emotional learning with regards to relationships.

Elias et al. (2003) states that "a professional with a new kind of preparation will be needed to foster implementation and scaling up of sustainable innovations to promote academic and social-emotional learning" (p. 316). Though at the time Elias et al (2003) dismisses counselors citing a lack of training in prevention and program implementation, the currently defined role of school counselors and changes in preparation programs lends itself to this naturally in today's world. Edelman (2017) discusses the need for more

counselors in schools and college advisors in districts where students have need of a knowledgeable adult to guide them through this process. Schools providing dedicated college counselors to disadvantaged kids can move the needle on what should be the most urgent priority in American higher education: getting more low-income, first-generation, and minority students into college (Edelman, 2017).

Call to the Field

Today there is a consistent expectation of schools to play a large part in encouraging the development of children and adolescents by preparing them for their future roles in society. Increasing attention to fulfill the role of supporting the whole child as best as a possible, schools should not limit their focus to strictly academic based programs (Greenberg et al., 2003). According to Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004), teaching and learning in schools should have strong social, emotional, and academic components. Unfortunately, due to the ever evolving culturally diverse population of students with varied abilities and motivation levels in the array of schools many students lack social-emotional competencies. As a result, students become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health (Blum & Libbey, 2004).

Benson (2006), states in a national sample of 148,189 sixth to twelfth graders, only 29%–45% of surveyed students reported they had social competencies such as empathy, decision making, and conflict resolution skills, and only 29% indicated their school provided a caring, encouraging environment. According to Klem and

Connell (2004), by high school as many as 40%–60% of students become chronically disengaged from school, and approximately 30% of high school students engage in a variety high-risk behavior interfering with school performance, jeopardizing their potential for success. Disengagement within schools, of concern in the high school setting, influences attendance, graduation, college going, and college retention rates. It is becoming a more prominent notion that by providing students with comprehensive social and emotional learning (SEL) programming within schools which is characterized by safe, caring, and well-managed learning environments and instruction in SEL skills, many of these learning barriers and associated risk factors can be addressed (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013).

According to CASEL, social and emotional learning can be described as the process in which individuals ranging from children to adults obtain and appropriately apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (2013). Within the concept of social emotional learning, there five key components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making which come together to aide and encourage students to regulate their emotions, make friends, resolve conflicts respectfully, avoid engaging in risky behaviors, and make ethical and safe choices (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013).

To provide a concise description of the role each component plays in the overarching

realm of social emotional learning, each component is detailed. Self-awareness considers one's emotions and values as well as one's strengths and limitations. Self-management pertains to managing emotions and behaviors to achieve one's goals. Social awareness includes understanding and empathizing for others, relationship skills is based on forming positive relationships, working in teams, and dealing directly with conflict. Lastly responsible decision-making entails making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013).

The five core components SEL can help students further develop other academic and essential lifetime learning skills, including but not limited to critical thinking skills, academic success, employability skills, and life skills. For instance, according to Schaps, Battistich, and Solomon (2004), these SEL competencies can help students become better communicators, cooperative members of a team, effective leaders, resilient individuals, and caring productive members their communities. Collectively these attainable skills have been increasingly acknowledged by today's employers and educators as important characteristics for achievement in their respective work environment and postsecondary settings.

Recommendations and Implications

School counselors play a critical role in the process of students being aware of steps to applying to college and are significantly involved in the process once students begin their applications and other postsecondary options. Thus, inevitably, school counselors are essential to the social support system of first-generation students. Since the impact of social support correlates with such

positive outcomes for students and those they directly engage with, it is essential for school counselors to be proactive in implementing methods and interventions targeting increased social support for first-generation college students. First-generation students benefit from social support through formal programs and informal relationship building. As a result of social support systems and SEL, short term and long-term benefits are evident when effective social support is put into place.

In the short term, when school counselors or other involved school leaders implement programs such as CASEL, students have more support and social skills to do well in college and beyond in the long run. Specifically, the short-term potential outcomes for CASEL include improved positive social behavior, reduced problem behavior, reduced emotional distress and improved academic performance. To learn more about the delivery of the CASEL program and how to access other social support guides and best practices, school counselors should engage in professional learning opportunities to increase knowledge and resources on social supports for first-generation college students. The contact school counselors have with seniors has great potential to focus on academic and postsecondary planning. However, school counselors are encouraged to facilitate more classroom lessons focusing on social and emotional wellness with seniors as a method to reach all seniors including first-generation college students. Social and emotional learning can also be implemented through small groups in order to target first-generation students more effectively and directly. Small groups facilitated by counselors, embed peer support into the network of social support aimed to assist first-generation

college students. Peer support along with professional support is valuable to social and emotional positive influences and skill building. By forming friendships with other peers who are also first-generation students, further increases their emotional support interactions, widening their social support system (Gist-Mackey, Wiley, & Erba, 2018 2017). Friendship building and maintaining healthy relationships are essential to social success in college and careers. Administrators, principals and other school leaders must buy in to school counselors spending more time focusing on the social/emotional domain of the school counseling curriculum.

According to the literature, students receiving higher levels of social support from close friends and relatives increase their likelihood to achieve satisfaction in college and better social and academic acclimation and transitions (Gist-Mackey, et al., 2018). Therefore, in the absence of or as a substitute for any lacking familial support, in addition to implementing formal programs, school counselors are encouraged to initiate informal social supports developing relationships with their students to create a supportive environment allowing students to feel safe and comfortable e sharing their concerns about college and transition. Further, social support involves supportive communication language; both verbal and nonverbal (Gist-Mackey, et al., 2018). Positively reinforcing and acknowledging student's efforts offers praise, encouraging young people to continue with their drive, increasing motivation and to follow through with the postsecondary planning process and transition to college. As a result of students forming trustworthy relationships with school counselors in high school, they may be more likely to

reach out to and rely on school personnel and college advisors, supporting success in college. Further leading to forming relationships with supervisors to be successful in the workplace environment (Gist-Mackey, et al., 2018).

Current literature and best practice recommendations emphasize five key competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making) of social and emotional learning. These competencies provide direct and indirect and short term and long-term benefits for the student and others. First-generation college students, grasping these fundamentals, have an increased likelihood to find success in their postsecondary pursuits and completion their endeavors. Moreover, companies, organizations and other stakeholders benefit from these early social and emotional interventions, in turn gaining employees possessing developed and enhanced employability skills. First-generation students with social support to develop better stress coping skills and resiliency--skills essential to success in the work environment (Gist-Mackey, et al., 2018). As presented in the introduction, employers are requiring college degrees more in their employees. Therefore, it is also to their benefit to buy in to these social support endeavors to reach a population of individuals with great employability potential and close barriers preventing them from accessing and attaining advantageous postsecondary opportunities.

Although much research has been composed on first-generation college students, a more in-depth analysis to determine other factors playing a role in the success of first-generation collected students to determine if varying types of

social support are beneficial. Variables like environmental factors, financial status, access to resources, school location, etc. should be considered, instead of generalizing the recommendations found in the existing literature to all first-generation students. This information would be useful to the school counselor or school leader already addressing social and emotional learning, with limited success. This may require a closer examination of first-generation students at their school and employing more specific and targeted social interventions. Additional research is needed to examine first-generation students lacking support from parents or guardians. For some students, they may have an abundance of emotional support from their parents, however, the information they need to move forward with the postsecondary planning process shifts to focus more on internal motivation and self-efficacy may be necessary.

Further, research on peer support versus professional support may assist stakeholders to effectively maximize support for first-generation students. To take case in point, students who have parental emotional support, but lack the support of same age peers may benefit more from peer social support versus the support from school counselors or other school leaders. However, more research is needed to determine the significant differences between these two levels of social and emotional support.

Overall, research undoubtedly encourages a call for social support to further close the gap and diminish barriers for first-generation students to achieving postsecondary success. The implementation of social support initiatives has a positive impact on the individual student and others

(i.e. family members and community). Well supported first-generation students have potential to be involved citizens in our society who may eventually give back and assist other first-generation students in the future.

Conclusion

It is important to note social support is not the only factor promoting postsecondary success for first-generation college students. However, the intent of the present manuscript emphasizes the need for social support as a primary factor to foster motivation and confidence for first-generation students pursuing higher education opportunities. School counselors tend to work less in the social domain of the school counseling curriculum with high school aged students and more so in the academic and career domains, especially with senior students. The authors make the call to action supporting and advocating for promoting a social/emotional learning focus for first-generation college students. This call to the field positively impacts first-generation students' self-esteem, self-efficacy and coping skills.

The literature existing for social support and the impact on first-generation college students is consistently discussed in the literature. First-generation students accessing social support matriculate as effective college students and efficient, valuable assets as employees in their careers as they gain several employability skills. School counselors play an imperative role in preparing students for life after high school. Furthermore, teachers, administrators and other school personnel also greatly influence students and their postsecondary plans, assisting them with the process. Therefore, all individuals impacting students are encouraged to

engage in a wrap-around, holistic approach to social support, supportive communication and other behaviors assisting in the development of healthy social skills fostering the five key competencies of social and emotional learning. Lastly, this approach promotes resiliency, collaboration, perseverance and other qualities serving students in their postsecondary success and closing disparaging gaps and barriers between first-generation students and their peers.

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