

# Unveiling the Hidden Assets that First-generation Students Bring to College

By Lisa Minicozzi, Ed.D., and Allison Roda, Ph.D.

## Abstract

The purpose of this research was to discover what specific attitudes and behaviors first year students believed were necessary to transition to college by employing a qualitative lens. We chose to explore how students describe building their identities as college students, responding to the cultural shifts between high school and college, and interacting with the power structures in five Long Island institutions of higher education. Specifically, we compared 55 students along two dimensions—first-generation students of color at public and community colleges (n=22 students), and White private college students who are non-first-generation (n=33 students).

## Introduction

The feeling of being unprepared academically and social-emotionally for college life has been explored and documented in the scholarly and popular literature (Conley, 2013, 2014; Duckworth, 2016; Nagaoka et. al., 2013). J. D. Vance in his 2016 memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, describes the unforgiving reality of growing up in a poverty-stricken Appalachian culture and the anxiety he faced when he received his college acceptance letter, to which he states:

Excitement turned to apprehension, but I reminded myself that college was an investment in my future...as I worried less about the financial aid forms, I began to worry for another reason: I wasn't ready. Not all investments are good investments. All of that debt, and for what? To get drunk all the time and earn terrible grades? Doing well in college required grit, and I had far too little of it...Everything about the unstructured college experience terrified me—from feeding myself healthy food to paying my own bills (pp.155-156).

J. D. Vance's statements underscore the deficit-based assumptions some people have about low-income, first-generation students entering college as being unprepared. Indeed, research has shown that first-generation college students, defined as students whose parents (or guardians) did not complete a 4-year college degree, are systematically excluded from accessing opportunities and successfully completing college degrees (Kezar, 2010). While there is a growing number of first-generation students

enrolled in U.S colleges, the number of first-generation students earning a bachelor's degree is declining: "Between 1999-2000 and 2011-2012, the proportion decreased from 37 percent to 33 percent" (Strauss, 2018, np.).

Our research examines this deficit-based view of first-generation students by showing that first-generation versus non-first-generation students enter college with different mindsets about what it takes to navigate their first year of college based on prior experiences and family influences, and that all students are lacking important knowledge of the hidden curriculum of college life.

## Related Literature and Framework

While the focus of the predominant research on college readiness has emphasized academic preparation and performance, there is a new focus, which broadens the definition of college readiness beyond standardized test scores to include non-cognitive skills (Barnett, 2016; Conley, 2014; Roderick, Coca, & Nagaoka, 2011; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013). Research has shown that non-cognitive skills can be taught and are crucial for negotiating the college transition process (Farrington, et al., 2012; Duffy & Sedlacek, 2011). College students, however, continue to face many barriers to persisting in college and earning a degree.

There seems to be a disconnect between what is taught in high school and what is expected in college, and this gap is most pronounced for first-generation, low-income students and/or students of color who often take fewer advanced courses during high school (ACT, 2006). Black and Latino, and low-income students accounted for the largest numbers of students not being college ready in reading and math (NAEP, 2015). It is clear that race and ethnicity, which is often linked to poverty and access, is a defining factor in college readiness and success (Massey & Fischer, 2005).

To examine readiness for college, we wanted to discover what specific attitudes and behaviors first year students believed were necessary to transition to college by employing a qualitative lens. We chose to explore how students describe building their identities as college students, responding to the cultural shifts between high school

and college, and interacting with the power structures in five Long Island institutions of higher education. Specifically, we compared 55 students along two dimensions—first-generation students of color at public and community colleges (n=22 students), and White private college students who are non-first-generation (n=33 students).

The research questions that helped guide our research include:

1. What norms, attitudes and behaviors do Long Island college students perceive as necessary for navigating the first year college experience?

1a. According to a diverse group of first-year students, how do they respond to the cultural shifts and power structures between high school and college norms and expectations?

1b. How do first-generation students of color vs. non-first-generation White students compare and contrast on the readiness characteristics that they believe are necessary for the high school to college transition process?

## Research Methods

A case study design was used to examine this "contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" (Yin, 2014, p. 18). Data consisted of a sample of 12 focus group interviews at the college level to gather insight into student behaviors and attitudes associated with college readiness. All focus groups were conducted by two Long Island faculty members that teach in suburban private colleges and specialize in educational inequality. Our positionality as professors and researchers gave us access to first-year students (one of us teaches a first-year seminar), and insider knowledge into the successes and challenges that first-generation students face. The inclusion criteria for students consisted of a mix of females and males, representing various racial/ethnic and socioeconomic populations. As a result, our sample included participants with a diverse and wide-ranging set of goals and ambitions.

Interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All interviews were approximately one hour in length. The semi-structured interview protocol covered the following topics: definition of college readiness; preparation for college; attitudes and behaviors that helped with the transition; challenges faced; and coping strategies. Data analysis was ongoing throughout the data collection stage.

Much can be learned about this particular case of college readiness and the college transition process from the perspective of first-generation vs. non-first-generation college first-year students on Long Island. While we do not claim that the findings can be generalized to all students' experiences, they could be applicable to students coming from similar demographic backgrounds on Long Island, and beyond.

## Findings

Our research found that students who are taught to be independent learners and workers, to interact and communicate with faculty, and to know when and where to seek help felt better prepared for the transition to college. Findings indicate that first-generation students are better prepared for independence in college because of their prior work related experiences during high school. Interestingly, these same students are less prepared for self-advocacy in college because of their 'go it alone' mentality. Students who are non-first-generation, on the other hand, feel they do not have much experience being independent because parents and high school teachers are 'excessively babying' and protecting them. They do have experience, however, being self-advocates because they are explicitly taught how to seek help from professors and other adults in their learning communities.

Overall, the focus group data suggest that first-generation vs. non-first-generation students are receiving different messages from their high schools and families about college readiness, and therefore enter the first year with different assets that they bring to navigate the critical first year in college.

## First-generation Students

To fully transition and overcome freshmen year challenges, the findings illustrate that students need to possess an understanding of the institution's cultural context and social structures, or rather, the hidden curriculum. Students who can readily adapt and acclimate to the norms and expectations of the institution will meet with greater success. However, first-generation students were taught to "get it on your own" and therefore they expected to figure out the hidden curriculum of college life by themselves instead of actively seeking help and advice from others as the non-first-generation students were taught to do.

We heard how first-generation students of color were getting different messages from their parents, communities, and high schools about what to expect in college. When asked what attitudes and behaviors will help you navigate college, a Black female student from a low-income high school replied: "growing up in a minority community, I was always told that, 'If you're not going to get it, no one's going to get it for you'. So you gotta go get it on your own. So, that's why I have that grind attitude mostly."

Another Black female student remarked about the need to have an inner drive in college when she said: "my parents worked so hard and don't have a lot of money and was even broke all the time. It gives me a drive to want to do community service, to help other people, to go to work and to get good grades." A Latino student from the community college focus group said he, and "other students who come here" are on their own and have to adjust to that: "I had to learn to be on my own" with my schoolwork. Another student

said that students who make it in college all have "self-motivation, they don't have anyone pushing them to do better, they have themselves."

First-generation students said that they learned this independent mindset inside and outside of school. For example, most students in the public university and community college focus groups spoke about having to work night shift jobs and taking care of younger siblings, and even sick parents. When asked a probing question, "is that something that you learned on your own, or did someone teach you self-motivation and independence?", one Latino student quickly responded:

I was always self-motivated I guess. When I was younger, my mother, she always worked a lot so she was like hardly home. I mean she was there, she was in my life but she was always working. So, like with me and my siblings, we were always by ourselves so we handled everything ourselves, well, most things ourselves and so I guess I always for a long time I had that self-motivating factor I think.

In other words, first-generation college students of color did not necessarily expect faculty or advisors to help them, even though that is part of their job. Instead they expected to do things on their own first because that is the only way they knew how to do it. During the community college student focus group, a Black female student explained her plan for seeking help in college: "You need to find a way. If you see yourself slacking in school, you're going to always have to find a way."

### **Non-First-generation Students**

On the contrary, we found that college students who are not first-generation students are good at being self-advocates, but lack independence because they are used to parents and teachers hand holding. They also have not had very much work experience, even though they might have wanted a job. Indeed, students expressed interest in gaining more autonomy in high school, but often said that their parents did not want them to be overextended.

High school students understandably rely on their parents to guide their education up to this point. Yet, there seemed to be more hand holding in non-first-generation student households compared with first-generation students, even in college. Compared to the 'go it alone' independent attitude of first-generation students, the students who had some knowledge of college life from their families relied on their parents to help them navigate the first year college experience. Since their parents had first-hand experience in college, they had direct knowledge of the hidden curriculum of college life. A White private school student admitted that his social support person was his mother whom he face-timed from his dorm room. His mother would ask him: "Did you do this? Did you do that? Good, now go relax and have dinner."

Another White student in a private school commented, parents are "a really big part of it [college transition] since they've been guiding us since we were so little."

During the focus groups, we also heard how high school teachers would give students more guidance and structure with assignments compared to college professors. As one White private college student explained, in high school, students see teachers every day so they can remind them when assignments are due, and give them help to fix mistakes, whereas in college, students see professors once a week so students have to be 'on their own' with no reminders of due dates or chances to resubmit for a higher grade:

It's like [in high school] teachers would give you an assignment, they'd give you a lot of time to do it, and they made sure that if you got it wrong, you knew how to fix it. And they like they would make you like do corrections to get a higher grade. And in college it's like you're more on your own, it's like you can't rewrite your essay, you should have done that the first time or it's like your teacher, it's like you're not seeing them every day, so they can't remind you, 'Oh yeah, you have this due'. Like it's like they tell you you had a paper due and then, 'Oh, I forgot about it', it's like oh no one ever reminded me, you know (mmm). So, it's like in high school they do a lot more like, they're careful and cautious with you.

Other students at the focus group chimed in by saying how high school teachers and parents were on top of them when they missed assignments every single day, which made it hard to fall behind. In comparison, college professors expect students to be independent and do not check up on them when they miss assignments. This new and unexpected norm in college-to be more independent and receive less hand holding from teachers and parents was the source of stress and anxiety for some students, particularly if they fell behind and were unable to catch up.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research found important differences between how first-generation students vs. students who are non-first-generation navigated their first year in college. We found that while first-generation students are being taught independence at home and at school, what is missing is self-advocacy skills. This is the case because they are being taught that they need to go it alone. On the other hand, students who are non-first-generation have self-advocacy skills because they are used to teacher and parent hand holding in high school. They are explicitly being taught to seek help from adults and peers when needed. What is missing in these students' life experiences is being independent learners and workers.

This study suggests the need for a more expansive view of college readiness; one that first uncovers and secondly prepares students for the hidden curriculum of

college life. Given the growing number of first-generation students on college campuses that are not receiving a degree, students need to be explicitly taught the hidden curriculum of college life, such as cultural differences between high school and college, learning how to manage their time and prioritize, communicating effectively with faculty, and seeking help when needed (instead of struggling in silence). This type of first-year seminar course geared towards the unique challenges first-generation college students experience is being offered in several colleges across the country (Chatelain, 2018).

In the end, preparing students for the college transition becomes a shared responsibility between high schools and institutions of higher education. This necessary work involves changing mindsets from a deficit-view of first-generation students to an asset-focused model that provides tailored supports and resources to create a more equitable playing field and helps ensure greater retention and student success.

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Lisa Minicozzi, Ed.D., is Assistant Professor for the Early Childhood Education Special Education Program as well as the Program Director for Educational Leadership at Adelphi University, Garden City, NY.

Allison Roda, Ph.D., is Assistant Professor in the Educational Leadership for Diverse Learning Communities program at Molloy College, Rockville Centre, NY.