Strategies for Enhancing the Transition of First-Generation Students to Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

First-generation students are disproportionately overrepresented in the most disadvantaged income, racial, and gender groups and therefore experience layers of oppression that especially influence their ability to successfully obtain admission to postsecondary education institutions. School counselors are positioned to help prospective first-generation students overcome the obstacles to college admissions. The purpose of this conceptual manuscript is to provide school counselors with a clearer picture of important characteristics of and challenges for prospective first-generation students and to suggest strategies that may improve the postsecondary education entry rates of this currently underserved population. Using Bourdieu’s theory of social and cultural capital to define the deficits these students face, strategies to increase the level of support from educators are presented.

Keywords: first-generation college students, social capital, cultural capital, school counselor, college access

Twenty-first century American schools have become a very diverse platform in which educators are required to possess a strong understanding of the differences in backgrounds and preparations of their students. The U.S. Department of Education (USDOE; n.d.) has established college and career-readiness standards to encourage state education agencies to set rigorous goals for schools to prepare all students for success after high school. Educators have been challenged to “raise the bar so that every student in this country—regardless of socioeconomic status, race, or geographic location—is held to high learning standards that will ensure students have the skills to compete in today's global, knowledge-based economy” (USDOE, n.d., para. 1). In addition, school counselors are challenged by the American School Counselor Association’s (ASCA; 2012) National Model to advocate for all students and to ensure equitable access to education and preparation for their future.
One segment of the school population that needs special attention from educators and student service personnel regarding career and college readiness is prospective first-generation college students. First-generation students are defined as those whose parents neither attended nor graduated from a postsecondary institution of learning (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). In 2012, roughly 50% of undergraduate students were first-generation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). First-generation students attend college at much lower rates than their counterparts. In contrast with first-generation college students, 82% of students whose parents attended college successfully transitioned to college after completion of high school (Choy, 2001). First-generation students are also disproportionately overrepresented in the most disadvantaged income and racial groups and therefore experience layers of oppression that especially influence their ability to successfully obtain admission to postsecondary educational institutions (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nuñez, 2000; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001).

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) termed capital as assets that people can obtain to help them in different aspects of their lives. In considering first-generation college students, Bourdieu’s theory of cultural and social capital assists in understanding the obstacles encountered by this group of learners. Bourdieu proposed the concept of cultural capital as something that is acquired over time through home and parental socialization. He found that in education systems, even though it appears that students are rewarded by their academic talents, in fact, they are rewarded for their cultural capital. Middle and upper class families have more cultural capital than lower class families. Students with cultural capital are more likely to go to college and obtain a prestigious career. Social capital has also been proven to be a useful way to understand the experiences of first-generation college students. Social capital is the term for the value of a relationship that provides support and assistance in certain social situations (Bourdieu, 1977; Stanton-Salazar, 1997). Networks of relationships assist students in adjusting to and maneuvering in an unfamiliar environment by providing them with important information, emotional support, and guidance. Social capital is a form of capital that resides in relationships among individuals that facilitate transactions and the transmission of different resources (Attinasi, 1989).

Quantitative and qualitative studies of educational inequality that address Bourdieu’s (1986) concepts of cultural and social capital have been conducted with first-generation students as participants. Most quantitative study investigators have operationalized the concept of cultural capital as appreciation of and participation in a high culture, while investigators in qualitative studies have primarily focused on first-generation students’ interactions with gatekeepers such as school counselors and teachers (Dumais & Ward, 2010). Both sets of investigators supported Bourdieu’s definition of cultural capital as consisting of assets like forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages a person receives. Belief in possessing cultural capital is more common among members of the middle and upper classes, and Bass (2014), Dumais (2002), Lareau (2000), and Naidoo (2004) found statistical relationships between cultural capital and positive educational outcomes.

On the other hand, first-generation students have been found to have deficits in cultural (Dumais & Ward, 2010) and social (McDonough, 1997) capital that become obstacles to admission to college. Social capital refers to resources gained through group membership, networks of influence and support, and other relationships (Bourdieu,
1986). Networks of relationships assist students in adjusting and maneuvering in an unfamiliar environment by providing them with important information, emotional support, and guidance. Differences in the quality and quantity of social networks that students are able to access may explain differences in academic engagement and access to college (Stanton-Salazar, 1997).

Researchers have provided a wealth of information about the inequities in educational experiences and outcomes for first-generation students. For example, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) found that first-generation students participated in less rigorous academic programs in high school, resulting in lower overall grade point averages than their counterparts. In addition, Zeisman (2012) reported that first-generation students are less active in school clubs and sports and spend less time effectively preparing for standardized assessments.

As presented above, transition to college for first-generation students is challenging both academically and culturally, putting these students at higher risk for early departure from college (Choy, 2001). The purpose of this conceptual manuscript is to provide school counselors with a clearer picture of important characteristics of and challenges for prospective first-generation students and to suggest strategies that may improve the college-going rate of this currently underserved population. The content of this manuscript includes a review of the common challenges facing and the strengths possessed by prospective first-generation students. School counselors are challenged to understand the characteristics of prospective first-generation students prior to determining specific interventions that may help them make a successful transition to postsecondary education. Potentially useful evidence-based information about the specific needs of these students and related ideas for supporting them will be presented. The final stage of this presentation will be to recommend strategies that can be implemented by school counselors that include recommendations from the ASCA (2012) National Model.

### Challenges and Strengths of First-Generation Students

Prospective first-generation college students possess unique characteristics that put them at higher risk of academic failure and lower their chances of college admission and success. Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of cultural and social capital assists in understanding the obstacles encountered by this group of students. Bourdieu defined cultural capital as “verbal facility, general cultural awareness, aesthetic preferences, information about the school system, and educational credentials” (Swartz 1997, p. 74). Social capital has also provided a useful way to understand the challenges for first-generation college students. Social capital highlights the value of relationships that provide support and assistance in certain social situations (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Unfortunately, many prospective first-generation college students lack the cultural and social capital that other college students possess, and that deficit makes success more difficult for these students. The following presentation of challenges faced and strengths possessed by prospective first-generation college students is presented to highlight the importance of addressing social and cultural capital deficits.
Challenges Prospective First-Generation Students May Face

Thirty-four percent of all four-year college students in the United States are considered first-generation students (Pascarella et al., 2004). As stated above, these students face unique challenges related to access to postsecondary education and eventual graduation. According to Pascarella et al. (2004), they face challenges in three overlapping categories: pre-college characteristics, persistence, and graduation.

Among pre-college characteristics, first-generation students on average tend to have less academic preparation in high school, lower high school grade point averages, and lower college admission standardized test scores (Pascarella et al., 2004). These students are more likely to be members of families with low socioeconomic status and to receive less family support, especially assistance with college admissions and access. In addition, over the past 10 years, there has been an increase in female, minority, and English language learners that are first-generation students (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Zeisman, 2012). Low-income, female, minority, and English language learners have been found to have a greater chance of leaving college during the first year, and being first-generation students causes them to struggle even more (The Pell Institute, 2008).

Researchers have found that first-generation college students possess limited knowledge of the college student role and college culture and generally complete fewer credit hours during the first year of college as compared to their non-first-generation peers (Greenwald, 2012; Stephens et al., 2012). Pascarella et al (2004) reported lower participation in preparation for classes and extracurricular activities and that they generally received lower grade point averages. First-generation students overall tend to report having to work during college and being required to complete more developmental coursework than their peers. These obstacles may have caused the first-to-second year attrition rate for first-generation students to range from 25% to 50% (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Pascarella et al., 2004; Zeisman, 2012).

First-generation students are often disadvantaged “when it comes to postsecondary access—a disadvantage that persists even after controlling for other factors such as educational expectations, academic preparation, support from parents and schools in planning and preparing for college, and family income” (Choy, 2001, p. 4). These disadvantages have been found to continue from K–12 educational levels to postsecondary education for those in pursuit of a higher degree (Choy, 2001).

Differences between first-generation students and their peers whose parents attended college are categorized into five areas (Choy, 2001). The first difference is that first-generation students planning to attend college are often required to maneuver the application process without help from their parents because many of their parents have limited knowledge of the often complicated process (Choy, 2001; Wimberly & Noeth, 2004). A second difference is that first-generation students are more likely to benefit from college preparation during high school, including learning what to expect of college life, and an absence of this preparation puts them at a disadvantage (Noeth & Wimberly, 2002). Third, first-generation students tend to lack rigorous academic preparation when compared with their peers with college-educated parents because their parents may not realize the importance of taking challenging courses in high school (Martinez & Klopott, 2005; Warburton et al., 2001). The fourth difference is that first-generation students who perceive college education as a requirement to successful employment often attend
colleges that are close to home even though the institutions may not be a good fit for them. Unfortunately, making the decision to attend a school that does not match one’s interests and needs often leads to attrition before completing degree requirements (Choy, 2001; Horn & Nevill, 2006). The fifth difference is the tendency to experience lower self-esteem and social acceptance, which leads first-generation students to live at home and work part-time more often than their counterparts (Horn & Nevill; Warburton et al., 2001).

These challenges that first-generation student face can cause deficits in cultural and social capital. Having less academic preparation in high school that results in lower grade point averages and college admission test scores are examples of cultural capital challenges due to not having received preparation to succeed in postsecondary education comparable to their counterparts. Additional cultural capital deficits include limited knowledge of the college student role, the importance of studying independently for classes, and participation in extracurricular activities. These students are often unfamiliar with the complex college application process. Having less familial support, particularly in college-related matters, and experiencing lower self-esteem and social acceptance are examples of social capital deficits.

**Strengths Prospective First-Generation Students May Possess**

Although sparser than the literature about challenges first-generation students face, there are data describing their important assets that can help prospective first-generation students succeed. Garrison and Gardner (2012) investigated personal assets of a sample of three successful first-generation students and found four major themes identifying strengths: proactivity, goal direction, optimism, and reflexivity. They found 13 common strengths that supported the development of these assets: resourcefulness, strategic thinking, self-reliance, practical realism, flexibility, persistence, positivity, hopefulness, self-confidence, insightfulness, compassion, gratitude, and balance. Lived experiences were determined to have influence on the development of the students’ assets (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

These first-generation students indicated a variety of ways they initiated action in order to make their college experiences possible, and these efforts were directly connected to learning and student persistence (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Ricks, 2016). These students were experienced in taking necessary first steps as well as engaging in a long-term practice of taking action. These first-generation students were mission-driven and developed short-term and long-range goals related to academic intentions and their personal lives. They were able to identify challenges in terms of life direction related to their higher education objectives. The students were flexible enough to adjust to transitions and indicated these behaviors were acquired from experiences in their family histories (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

The students displayed optimistic perspectives that impacted their academic achievement (Garrison & Gardner, 2012; Ricks, 2016) They were very enthusiastic and eager and used these traits to their benefits in personal and academic settings. They were hopeful and desired to be self-sufficient, earn a good wage, and have an interesting career. The first-generation college students were self-aware, possessed personal insight, and had a developed well-being. They were self-confident and utilized powerful positive thinking to confront disappointments with realistic solutions. They were accepting,
empathic, and tolerant individuals, and these attributes are important in higher education settings with group assignments and diverse campus communities (Garrison & Gardner, 2012).

These unique strengths that first-generation students may possess can provide a framework for creating interventions to assist them in attending postsecondary education institutions. Some of their strengths that relate to cultural capital are proactivity and initiative along with the ability to set short- and long-range goals. Their positive outlook on life and willingness to reflect on their performance and make changes provide additional evidence of cultural capital. First-generation students also demonstrated elements of social capital, which include being compassionate and tolerant of individual differences.

**Synthesis of Challenges and Strengths**

The evidence-based information presented above highlights the importance cultural and social capital play in the potential for prospective first-generation college students to navigate completion of high school, and acceptance to institutions of higher education, and make the transition to a postsecondary education culture. It is important to note that the challenges are potentially more overwhelming and are faced by nearly all first-generation students, while the strengths presented are not as equally distributed across all individuals within this population. The challenges these students face appear to be invitations that professional school counselors are trained and positioned to address via strategic, proactive interventions designed to enhance students’ strengths while overcoming their challenges.

**Recommended Interventions**

Having an understanding of the unique challenges for and strengths of first-generation students can inform school counselors when attempting to implement interventions to support them. Three strategies are presented herein for school counselors to consider using with prospective first-generation students. The strategies are: (a) providing proactive individual student planning, (b) creating a postsecondary education-going school culture, and (c) establishing a first-generation mentoring program. The three strategies provide a comprehensive framework for enhancing the cultural and social capital of prospective first-generation college students by offering proactive counseling and individual student planning for these students, attempting to create a school-wide comprehensive postsecondary education-going culture, and collaborating with the community to provide important social models for these students. Each strategy is described and discussed in terms of their relation to recommendations found in the ASCA (2012) National Model. Resulting interventions are presented in conjunction with each of the three strategies.

**Proactive Individual Student Planning**

Over the last two decades, the higher education community has employed a unique support system termed *intrusive academic advising* (Smith, 2007). Arising from the need to assist non-traditional students and those at-risk of academic failure, college advisors began reaching out to provide encouragement and additional support to students
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during the transition from high school to college. Intrusive advising has resulted in positive academic outcomes for at-risk students (Abelman & Molina, 2001; Molina & Abelman, 2000). This unique form of support is founded on developmental advising but includes an emphasis on consistent, intentional interactions between the advisor and advisee (Jeschke, Johnson, & Williams, 2001). Garing (1992) described intrusive advising as including advisor initiated early contact; assistance with identifying student strengths and weaknesses, and planning for academic, social, and organizational improvement. Additionally, students are assisted with continually monitoring and assessing their progress toward their goals.

Jeschke et al. (2001) studied intrusive advising for 126 college students who were randomly assigned to either a prescriptive advising approach or an intrusive advising approach. The experimental condition was provided by five faculty members who initiated contact during the first few weeks of the semester and a minimum of one additional contact per semester. While there were no differences in the academic performance between the two groups, the students who received intrusive advising felt more satisfied with their advisors because they spent more time with them (Jeschke et al., 2001).

School counselors can adopt intrusive academic advising techniques to provide much needed support to prospective first-generation college students. Proactive individual student planning, derived from the intrusive academic advising idea, can be incorporated in the comprehensive school counseling model beginning with needs assessments to determine what deficits students possess and which students are prospective first-generation college students. These assessments may be conducted prior to enrollment in high school to help counselors identify students who are at-risk so that specific intrusive plans can be developed. School counselors can address the needs of prospective first-generation students by scheduling regular sessions to set goals, examine personal strengths and challenges, and create action plans to achieve each student’s goals. Regular sessions will also be a time for counselors to help students assess their progress on a consistent basis.

By planning to respond to the needs of first-generation students, counselors are engaging in the individual student planning component of the ASCA (2012) delivery system. It is important for school counselors to begin building relationships with prospective first-generation students on the first day of school by attending events like orientation and intentionally being present during times of class change or lunch. Being active in the school gives school counselors the opportunity to meet and mingle with new students. It is important to get to know first-generation students and build relationships outside of the office because doing so may make it more comfortable for the students to interact with counselors. Since early initial contact is very important, counselors may utilize technological resources like e-mail or social media to reach out to students in order to provide an introduction to the services available in the counseling program. School counselors can continue to be involved and attend school-wide activities as often as possible. Frequent contact with other school staff members will provide useful information on student progress and areas that need attention.

Preparation for sessions is a major component of proactive individual student planning because students will tend to feel more welcome. Counseling offices should be warm and inviting so that prospective first-generation students will feel comfortable. It is
important to give the students the impression that nothing is more important than they are and this will ensure that they do not feel rushed. Prospective first-generation students may not know what to ask and creating a comfortable rapport will allow them time to think about questions they may have.

Proactive individual student planning for potential first-generation students directly responds to two of the four major components of the ASCA (2012) framework, that is, foundation and delivery of the comprehensive school counseling program. Assessing the needs of prospective first-generation college students aligns with identifying the school counseling program’s focus and responding to those needs. School counselors are challenged to provide services in a systematic method to respond to the vast needs of all students.

Postsecondary Education-Going School Culture

In schools where students do not have an understanding of or experiences with maneuvering the path from high school to college, the school staff can be very helpful by exerting extra efforts to help these students. Creating a postsecondary education-going school culture will help prospective first-generation students set aspirations to engage in further education and will help them obtain additional social and cultural capital needed to make the transition successfully. A postsecondary education-going school culture provides students with support and encouragement from all members of the school staff and includes knowledge needed for college success (Corwin & Tierney, 2007). A rigorous curriculum that encourages student success (Adelman, 2006) and an understanding of the academic behaviors and skills needed to be successful in college (Conley, 2008) are fundamental components to a postsecondary education-going school culture. Lee and Smith (1999) also asserted that a significant factor in this culture is the availability of social supports to help students in school.

In institutions with an effective school-wide postsecondary education-going culture, all staff members are focused on building knowledge about higher education and the academic practices required to be admitted and be successful in postsecondary education institutions (Ascher & Maguire, 2007). Conley (2008) proposed that students should be repeatedly taught skills such as self-monitoring, study skills, time management, and help-seeking behaviors. Another area to focus upon in this type of culture is providing individualized help to students by assisting with constructing goals and plans and then helping them to achieve these goals (Rosenbaum, 2011). It is important for students to make connections with teachers and other educators, and these connections have been found to increase a student’s social capital (Ascher & Maguire, 2007).

McKillip, Godfrey, and Rawls (2012) found evidence that the two crucial elements for providing a postsecondary education-going school culture are the school staff’s belief in the importance of acquiring academic content knowledge and a healthy socioemotional development of their students. Their qualitative case study included eight visits to an urban school to evaluate the effectiveness of implementing a postsecondary education-going school culture. The research team corroborated previous research findings on the importance of healthy relationships between students and school staff members. They found four critical aspects of relationships that assisted students in their study: (a) non-academic roles were present through student advisory sessions and with leaders of the school such as the school counselors and administrators, (b) a sense of
community existed among the students accompanied by student self-advocacy, (c) a common mission of the staff was to prepare students for postsecondary education through social and academic support, and (d) the structure of the school processes included assigning students to work with the same counselor and advisor during their entire high school experience.

Creating a postsecondary education-going school culture responds to several standards outlined in the ASCA (2012) National Model. It also encourages all school staff members to be invested in delivering the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (2014). School counselors can serve as a resource for all staff members by providing support directed toward helping students acquire these competencies. Consequently, the school culture should be positively impacted by a thorough review of the skills included in each domain of the National Model.

Mentoring for Prospective First-Generation Students

Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2005) reported that college-bound students are exposed to “fortuitous relationships.” These relationships provide students with the tools and information they need to successfully make the transition from high school to postsecondary education institutions. Students may have these relationships with peers, teachers, counselors, coaches, and parents and therefore receive the necessary support and preparation needed for higher education access and success. Students must have access to supportive individuals to remain engaged in the education process (Gándara, 1995; Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

Contreras (2011) noted that “mentors serve as an inspirational and motivational tool for students to see themselves in the place of the role model, believing that the same level of achievement is attainable” (p. 520). Prospective first-generation students can build their social capital by practicing the skills necessary to communicate effectively and seek resources when they are in need of assistance. Additionally, mentors who were first-generation students themselves provide hope for students who feel challenged by the complex and mysterious process of postsecondary education admissions. Mentors can provide individualized cultural capital through enhancing knowledge and understanding of the postsecondary education access factors such as preparing for standardized admissions tests, selecting postsecondary education institutions, considering majors and making career plans, and understanding the intricacies of acquiring financial aid.

School counselors could assume the leadership role in coordinating a school mentoring program for prospective first-generation students. Aligned with the program planning function of the ASCA (2012) National Model, counselors can recruit school and community members to help address deficit in students’ knowledge about postsecondary education. In addition, mentors can contribute to the comprehensive school counseling program by providing assistance with academic and career domains of the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success (2014).

Discussion

The ASCA (2012) National Model challenges school counselors to be creative and innovative to reach the specific needs of all students. Educators are challenged to meet the career and college readiness needs of all students so that they may find
successful careers. One cohort of students proven to be vulnerable to academic failure is those whose parents have not attended college. First-generation students have been found to lack social and cultural capital that is needed to successfully transition from high school to postsecondary education and to achieve success in higher education. Fortunately, school counselors are positioned to provide targeted, proactive support to help them overcome barriers to their success.

Implications for Practice

The strategies presented above are intentional and proactive in nature and meant to be implemented in ways that draw out and help prospective first-generation students. Simply asking these students to participate if interested may not be enough because they lack the social and cultural capital to realize the importance of utilizing postsecondary education-going support services. School counselors are encouraged to consider personal invitations for participating in the programs presented in a warm, inviting manner and accompanied by brief and clear didactic information about the importance of the invitations. Furthermore, the invitational strategies should include opportunities for parental involvement. A school-wide postsecondary education-going culture may include many components that involve parent education and participation. Parents of prospective first-generation college students may greatly benefit from participation along with their children in activities that teach and reinforce postsecondary education-going attitudes and skills. It is recommended that school counselors take care not to misinterpret reluctance from parents or students to participate as disinterest and instead interpret the behaviors as evidence of their lacking knowledge of the information milieu associated with postsecondary education options—attributes of lacking sufficient cultural and social capital.

Proactive individual student planning, postsecondary education-going school culture, and mentoring for prospective first-generation students will require a fair amount of “buy-in” from educators and leaders in the schools. It is important not to assume these school staff members will be as invested in supporting prospective first-generation students as are school counselors. Counselors are challenged to use this quest as an opportunity to engage in advocacy and education. An assumption herein is that school counselors are the experts in the school on student development needs and the related challenges and strengths possessed by their students. Equipped with this knowledge, school counselors may need to educate the school staff members on the importance of supporting all disenfranchised groups and build the case for the prospective first-generation students. Having support from all school staff members is crucial for creating an effective school-wide postsecondary education-going culture. By responding to the ASCA (2012) domain of advocacy for all students, school counselors can become leaders of change in their schools and ultimately create an environment where prospective first-generation students receive the specific support needed to make the transition to postsecondary education opportunities.

Recommendations for Research

As school counselors work to provide support for prospective first-generation postsecondary students, evidence of the effectiveness of their efforts is needed. Practitioner research conducted by school counselors can lead to identification of
strategies that provide the most impact on first-generation postsecondary education acceptance rates and successful transitions. School counselors can conduct practitioner research in a variety of ways via local program evaluation and accountability efforts while determining what interventions work and which do not work for this specific group. For example, what aspects of proactive individual student planning are associated with targeted postsecondary education-going knowledge skills? It would also be helpful to determine what components of school-wide postsecondary education-going culture development efforts have the greatest impact on building cultural and social capital in first-generation students. By coordinating mentoring programs, school practitioners can evaluate the effectiveness through qualitative and quantitative assessments. For example, what effect does mentoring have on the acquisition of social capital? Practitioner research is an excellent method of appraising these strategies and answering questions to further help perspective first-generation students in local settings. School counselors have an excellent vantage point to evaluate the effectiveness of these and other strategies designed to support first-generation college students in their schools.

Conclusion

In the present day world, engaging in postsecondary education is critical for a pathway to a successful career. Therefore, school counselors are challenged to find ways to enhance the cultural and social capital of prospective first-generation higher education students in order to promote higher rates of their entry into postsecondary education programs. Garrison and Gardner (2012) compared higher education support professionals to “gem cutters.” They further stated, “to the extent educators participate in the intricate work of mining the value of each student to expose their brilliance; then students may be appreciated in new ways” (p. 50). Their analogy of helping first-generation students reach their potential and ultimately engage in successful journeys to postsecondary education can be viewed as on target for school counselors. As counselors advocate, plan intervention programs, and proactively prepare these students, their actions will certainly be akin to those of Garrison and Gardner’s “gem cutters.”

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