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English 305

November 9, 2015

First Generation College Students: Working the Hardest, Achieving the Least

Four years ago, I sat in a financial aid session at new student orientation where I learned about all the expenses associated with college. After the session, I called my parents, who did not attend orientation, because I had sticker shock. I was attending a state university, but it seemed like I was paying out-of-state tuition at an Ivy League school. It was not until weeks later that I realized I had more than enough financial aid to cover the cost and would actually receive money from the university in a refund check. This story is not unique to me and is in fact a common trend for first generation college students such as myself. First generation students are inadequately prepared for college while in high school and poorly supported while receiving a post-secondary education.

Students from a variety of backgrounds are often the first in their families to attend college and receive a bachelor's degree, but it often is most common in low-income families. The film *First Generation* shares the stories of four high-achieving high school students with big dreams and lots of potential, but lack the resources and knowledge necessary to persist in college. Jess, Soma, Cecelia, and Dontay all attended different high schools in California but shared similar stories ("First Generation"). Since their families were low-income, they could not afford SAT and ACT prep materials to do well on the tests, applying for scholarships to pay for college was confusing to each of them, and they were not sure about how student loans worked. These four, like so

many other first generation students, faced many obstacles in being admitted to and attending a higher education institution.

First generation students by definition do not have knowledgeable family members to turn to when they have questions about college processes. Compared to continuing-generation students, research shows first generation students have less knowledge about college (Atherton 825). As a result of coming from low-income families, these students seldom even have parents that drive them around to visit campuses during their junior or senior years of high school (“First Generation”). Learning about and deciding to pursue a college education is an extremely difficult and emotional process, which most first generation students have to do alone. For Jess in *First Generation*, she chose to attend a community college in her hometown even though she maintained a perfect grade point average in high school. Similarly, Cecelia scored an exceptional score of 1990 on her SAT and could go to her dream school UCLA but instead attended a local state university for financial reasons (“First Generation”). Finances are, naturally, an ever-growing concern of first generation and all college students.

Even though a college education is expensive for anyone, it is a crucial deciding factor for first generation students and their families. While first generation students are low income and have little money to pay for school, it becomes worse when they do not realize they qualify for free assistance to pay tuition and fees. Students look at schools based on their published prices but often do not know they will get aid to pay the majority of it because of their income level (“First Generation”). Families making \$40,000 or less in a year often pay only a fraction of the college cost (“First Generation”).

This comes from federal Pell grants, state aid, and local scholarships that are often awarded specifically to those with the most need for the assistance. Soma received more than \$18,000 in aid to pay for college, which he used to attend his dream university in California (“First Generation”). Even if students do not qualify for enough aid to cover the full cost, there are loans available to cover what is left.

Student loans, although they must be paid back, can greatly reduce the cost of higher education if students act wisely when receiving them. A student loan yields a bigger return on an investment than any other loan (“First Generation”). A bachelor’s degree will increase a student’s earning power by \$22,000 per year and result in an increased earning of more than one million dollars in a lifetime (“First Generation”). Students, unfortunately, do not fully understand the concept of loan debt and first generation students understand less than the continuing generation. In a survey where the two groups were nearly equal, results showed first generation students are not receiving the necessary information about student loans and long-term implications of debt (Lee and Mueller 716). Since first generation students understand so little about loans and financial aid, Lee and Mueller said they are likely to make going into debt a strong consideration in attending college even more than other students (716). The solution to this and other problems is increasing education about college and the availability of information to first generation students.

Problems for first generation students do not go away when they are enrolled in a university, so programs are in place at that level to help those students make the difficult transition to college life. Since it is unclear which educational entity is responsible for financial literacy education, colleges can and are taking initiative to build that education

into existing college courses and orientation programs (Lee and Mueller 717). While it is great to see that taking place, it is already too late to reach all those potential college freshman that opted to not enroll for financial or family reasons. Dante in *First Generation*, for example, almost failed to enroll because he could not afford the hefty housing payment, which was due before his financial aid package came to him. Of 100 premiere universities in the United States, more than three-fourths of their enrollment comes from high-income students. The solution to increasing access to higher education for first generation students needs to go beyond the university level and start in high schools.

College preparation programs do exist in some high schools, but they are not common or prepared enough to solve the problems that exist. High school guidance counselors are often tasked with preparing students for college, which would be fine if the counselor to student ratio was not often one for hundreds of students (“First Generation”). Decreasing the workload for high school counselors or even hiring new dedicated staff members in the school system to educate students would greatly benefit first generation students once they step foot on a college campus. First generation students are a growing population and deserve attention at all levels. They present a unique set of needs and challenges that high schools and colleges both need to address (Winkle-Wagner 763). Making college more accessible and understandable for first generation students will not only benefit them but society as a whole.

A college education is one of the most valuable resources available to us and it should be possible for all students to go to college. If a student has the motivation to persist, financial and family situations should not be roadblocks. With more students

attending college because it is more accessible, there will be a more qualified workforce in the United States and the economy will boom. According to *First Generation*, the number one driver of economic growth is the college graduate rate. This means in order to see the positive benefits of first generation students attending college, they must also persist through college and graduate. It is up to high schools to prepare students to enter college and up to colleges to continue supporting them through graduation. It must be a collaborative effort to prepare and support first generation students.

Works Cited

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