

# ***The First-Generation Student Experience: Implications for Campus Practice, and Strategies for Improving Persistence and Success***

by Jeff Davis

Published by Stylus Publishing, 2010, 221 Pages

Reviewed by

Marjorie Savage (mbsavage@umn.edu), Parent Program Director, University of Minnesota

First-generation college students have become a hot topic of discussion in higher education for the past decade. By all accounts, the number of first-generation students is a rising population and will continue to increase over the next 20 years. This increase, the experts predict, will mean more racial and cultural diversity on campuses, more students with disabilities, more immigrants and first-generation Americans with English as a second language, and more students who are not fully prepared for the academic rigor of college.

In *The First-Generation Student Experience*, Davis notes that as colleges and universities take steps toward serving this growing group of students who face unique barriers to academic achievement and success, higher education must first clearly identify this population: How many first-generation college students are there? The term "first-generation" is defined in a variety of ways by different institutions and researchers, and data are collected through self-reporting from students who may not want to identify as a special population. Davis begins his book by calling for a unified and simplified definition, and his proposal is "Individuals can claim first-generation status if neither one of their parents or guardians possess a four-year degree" (p. 2). While other definitions restrict first-generation status to those whose parents did not attend college at all, Davis contends, "...first-generation student status is not about the number of years a parent attended college or the number of academic units that parent accumulated. It is about being competent and comfortable navigating the higher education landscape, about growing up in a home environment that promotes the college and university." (p. 4)

From his perspective as a faculty member, academic advisor, and administrator at Sonoma State University, California, the author analyzes how first-generation students are different from students whose parents have attained at least a

bachelor's degree. He connects first-generation status to higher levels of recent immigration, to race/ethnicity, and to low income status. He relays that a large percentage of first-generation students start at community colleges, and indicates that these are students who are most likely to require remedial courses, have lower self-esteem, have lower expectations for themselves, and lack study skills. Their challenges include selecting a major, hesitancy in speaking out during class, and familial problems.

The heart of the book is a series of 14 narratives by Sonoma State University students. The stories come from first-year and continuing students, transfers from community colleges or other four-year schools, graduate students, and older non-traditional students with children. Before writing their narratives, students were asked to read an article on first-generation students then reflect on their personal experiences. Most were non-white, several had parents who immigrated to the U.S., several were from single-parent homes, and nearly all were raised in low income households. All fit the author's definition of first-generation, although some had siblings who attended college, and all had at least one family member—a sibling, parent, or grandparent—who strongly encouraged college attendance.

The stories are compelling, and illustrate challenges that the 14 students overcame to be admitted into, transition to, and continue through the college experience. In many cases, the greatest difficulties came from their personal struggles with self-doubts, financial worries, adjustment issues, and feelings about their family's sacrifices. In nearly all examples, students attributed at least part of their success to their support systems—their parents, a teacher, a high school counselor, a brother or sister, friends, or an employer. Each student expressed higher education in terms of a personal value; they all had, at some point, made an intentional decision to go to college, saw a college degree as a way to improve their lives, and in most cases, overcame one or more specific crises to continue their education. Several expressed a sense of responsibility for obtaining an education as a way to show their gratitude to their family, recognizing the hardships their parents or siblings underwent to ensure their student's future.

In Davis's analysis of the narratives, he identifies five elements that he believes affect the core experience of first-generation students:

- A lack of sophistication about K-12 education that carries over into the postsecondary environment;
- A location in the psychological landscape of the postsecondary environment that establishes first-generation students as outsiders;
- A complicated identity development process produced from having to straddle two cultures—the home culture and the campus culture—that can terminate enrollment during the first two years of study and that often can add to anxiety about the unknown;
- A family dynamic concerning college attendance that is often much different from the family dynamic of non-first-generation students; and
- The ability to triumph over challenges and barriers, which speaks to a special kind of determination to succeed (p. 174–175).

Having identified these core elements, Davis makes recommendations for improving higher education to better support first-generation students. His recommendations include shifting institutional attitude by:

- establishing an environment that validates the importance and reduces the stigma of remedial courses,
- helping students normalize and understand the “imposter phenomenon,” and
- establishing campus lounges and study areas specifically for first-generation students.

Additionally, he recommends initiating campus requirements to benefit first-generation students by:

- requiring all first-generation students to enroll in study skills workshops;
- ensuring that instructors provide study skills information in all lower-division courses;
- placing first-generation students in formal, monitored study groups;
- requiring first-generation students to meet with academic advisors more frequently than non-first-generation students; and
- providing mentor programs matching first-generation students with mentors who are themselves first-generation.

The author calls for efforts to help first-generation students better understand the life of the academy, suggesting regular “demonstration of academics in action,” notably discussions or debates among faculty to “demonstrate the metaprocesses at play in the interchanges between faculty” (p. 190). He believes that first-generation students would benefit by being exposed to instructors’ preparation for teaching, understanding their writing and publication practices, and observing how academic departments function.

Orientation plays a critical role in the success of first-generation students, and Davis recommends separate orientation sessions for first-generation students and their families. For students, he calls for programs that specifically identify first-generation issues. For families, he warns that orientation content should not attempt to teach parents to become academic advisors to their children—a task he believes is too big for parents of first-generation students. Instead, these special parent orientation programs “can present material that addresses the issues that cause the most anxiety” (p. 191).

If separate orientation sessions for first-generation students and families are not possible, the author suggests that sessions should at least include information about the challenges for first-generation students. “For example, officials running the orientation should spend time describing how the lack of familiarity with postsecondary education can be a serious hindrance to doing well at the institution, and that views on the importance of this lack of familiarity and on the first-generation student category itself are changing” (p. 191). Following orientation, the author calls for post-orientation programs for first-generation students and their families “that seek to weaken the ever-present lure of returning to the home culture without a degree” (p. 192).

First-generation students, Davis believes, require significant help and

intervention in dealing with their relationships with family and friends from their home culture. He posits that first-generation students can suffer from depression at rates higher than their non-first-generation peers and suggests that institutions have a responsibility to anticipate such problems and forewarn students and parents through publications mailed home and through orientation programs before students start classes.

In calling for support for first-generation students to separate from their family and culture, the author echoes traditional student development theorists in citing the importance of engagement on campus. He notes that for most first-generation students, the desire and need to work “may be the single biggest impediment to first-generation students’ participating in campus activities” (p. 194). His assumption is that many work even if they do not need to, and if they are not working to stay enrolled, they should forego employment for participation in student activities.

Davis’s book on first-generation students addresses an important issue that most colleges and universities are currently examining in their efforts to improve retention rates. His contentions are well-documented that first-generation students frequently struggle with adjustment to college, and they drop out at rates higher than their non-first-generation peers. His approach provides a unique faculty perspective as part of the conversation, but his views are likely to raise some points of disagreement. For example, the definition he advocates for assigning first-generation status may be overly broad for some institutions, students, and parents. It fails to account for parents who do not have four-year degrees, but who perhaps had several years of college education and who have provided their children with significant social and cultural capital. He neglects to mention the differences for first-generation students who have gained significant background and study skills through advanced placement and international baccalaureate programs or who had high levels of support from mentors and advisors in their schools and communities.

The author does not recognize that non-first-generation students encounter and struggle with many of the same challenges as first-generation students, often at the same or higher levels of anxiety. A lack of college-level study skills and time management experience, hesitance to speak in class or make a connection with a faculty member, feeling like an “imposter,” fears of fitting in, difficulties in establishing peer relationships, and struggles to find a place for themselves on campus are typical transition issues. Few students receive advice or practice on these kinds of issues before they arrive on campus, and some students adjust more successfully and quickly than others, regardless of their family’s educational background. Moreover, personal characteristics such as risk-aversion and introversion may affect a student’s ability to quickly adjust or to seek out support, family educational status notwithstanding.

Perhaps most critically, Davis seems to view first-generation students primarily from the standpoint of what they lack in comparison to their peers. An important addition to his publication would be investigation into what first-generation students—and their families—can contribute to higher education. The narratives

the author includes show students with strong resolve, resilience, and personal strength—traits that their non-first-generation peers might learn from. The students talk about how their families have faced incredible hardships with grace and parents who have clearly identified their values and practiced them faithfully. Treating these family relationships as something to be resisted and overcome ignores the positive effects of strong family and cultural ties.

While the measures Davis recommends would certainly benefit first-generation students who need extra support and enculturation, it can be argued that an identification system to determine who truly needs assistance should be more sophisticated than what the author advocates. Recurring academic advising, mentor programs, study skills workshops, student engagement, study groups, and informal gathering spaces on campus are all excellent support services and can contribute to student success, but perhaps they should be made available to any student who needs them.