

BARRIERS FACED BY FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

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A first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parents did not complete a four-year college degree (Forbus, Newbold, & Mehta 2011). The goal of the current study was to document the opinions and experiences of first-generation college students on how social, racial, and financial barriers affect them and their transition into college. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analyzed by using thematic content analysis using excel spreadsheets to document and compare each interviewee's answer to every interview question. The participants of this study were asked to discuss their lives at home, transition into college, financial support systems, social support systems and connections at college, and their lives on campus. Major findings in the study show first-generation students who are athletes have an easier time transitioning to college; minority first-generation students were nervous about attending a predominantly white institution away from home, and: building connections with faculty does help the social, and financial barrier first-generation college students face.

Introduction

The topic being studied is the “Barriers First-Generation College Students Face.” Fifty-six percent of undergrad college students were first-generation students as of 2016 response to intervention (RTI) International. (2019). The goal of the current study is to understand why first-generation students have a difficult time staying in school. Nationally, 89 percent of low-income first-generation students leave college within six years without a degree (Fitzgerald & Delaney, 2002). The current study investigated factors that lead to lower graduation rates among first-generation students.

Financial Barriers

First-generation college students are defined as having parents who do not possess a college degree (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice 2008). Without a college degree many of these parents will be part of the working class; suggesting that first-generation students have parents who are employed in occupations that require lower-level skills, lower pay, and do not need a college degree (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Stuber, 2011). When parents have a lower economic status, first-generation students may feel a tension between wanting

to pursue higher education and helping to financially support their families. The recognition that one's parents may not have an abundance of financial resources causes low-income students to attend colleges they can afford, not colleges they are actually interested in, which negatively affects their college success. Often, first-generation students apply only to a single college and do that without help from high school councilors or parents. They cannot afford multiple application fees and they are unsure of how to determine a good fit between their interests and a college or university, as their parents have taken them to few, if any college tours (Banks-Santilli, 2019).

First-generation college students are particularly vulnerable to financial stress and the inability to manage scarce resources which can impede persistence and degree completion (Lyons, 2004). Filling out the free application for federal student aid (FASA) is imperative before every academic year because it allows students to apply for work study, federal grants, and federal student loans. The stress of filling out the FAFSA affects most college students in the United States, but it can be even more stressful when parents also do not know how to fill out these forms. Not understanding the FAFSA is detrimental for anyone who wants to attend college. Financial aid is a major source of support for first-generation college students, as they are less likely to receive financial support from parents for college-related expenses (Nomi, 2005). These financial concerns lead to a majority of first-generation college students selecting to attend a community college before transferring to a four-year institution (Perez-Antonio, 2016).

Since Black and Latinx students are more likely to come to college from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (compared to White and Asian American students), it is also more likely that they will personally endure much of the financial responsibility of college outside of what is covered by financial aid. (Baker & Robnett, 2012). This may mean spending more time than other students working at a part-time or full-time job in order to support themselves in college, which can impede from fulfilling college requirements. Additionally, Black and Latinx students often face different responsibilities like working and other family-oriented responsibilities. These responsibilities may distract from college responsibilities and have a negative impact on college success (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

Familial Support

A study conducted by Gibbons and Woodside (2014) found that fathers, specifically, had a large impact on the students' lives. Participants fathers also typically had working class jobs and participants felt they either had to join the workforce or go straight to school. Many participants chose to attend college because they have seen the repercussions of their fathers working minimum wage jobs for a living. The participants expectations about college were also heavily influenced by what their parents have told them about college increasing their chances of having a good career. The common ground between each participant was that to them and their families, finishing college is associated with success, not just for a career but also financial success along the way as well.

Research by Greene, Jewell, Fuentes and Smith (2019) also indicated the importance of family relationships in first-generation students' decisions to attend and matriculate in college. Many students turn to the support of important people in their lives, such as peers or parents, to help them navigate the transition to college (Dawson & Pooley, 2013). However, once students decide to attend college, there can be friction between the student and their family members. The friction is due to the family believing the student thinks they are better than them because they are receiving an education. Shifting family dynamics often causes the student to feel guilty for wanting to pursue higher education. One way which these supportive others may help first-generation students handle the transition to college is through a sense of security and intimacy, both of which can be obtained by supporting students' basic needs (Greene et al., 2019).

The lack of family support that results from the perception that the student is "better than" the parents is a barrier faced by many first-generation students. Greene et al. (2019) wanted to see if the need for college students to have satisfaction in the relationship with their parents is negatively related to their stress about college. The researchers investigated if higher levels of need satisfaction in the parental relationship will predict lower levels of worry about college and lower levels of family achievement guilt. They also wanted to investigate if parental involvement will moderate these above associations. The results of the study were that higher levels of autonomy-supportive parenting will strengthen these relationships, whereas higher levels of helicopter parenting will weaken them. Helicopter parenting does in fact hinder student success because it essentially adds more stress onto the student.

Racial Barriers

Huynh (2019) described the difficult transition to college life as a minority, specifically an Asian American. Huynh attended a predominantly white institution (PWI), and he talks about his own experiences and how institutions can help not only first-generation Asian Americans but all first-generation college students. Students who hold both Asian American and first-generation identities must reckon with the expectations of success and overcome the challenges they face in higher education, all while potentially lacking the necessary context and support to either meet these expectations or overcome such obstacles (Huynh, 2019). Since Huynh was a first-generation college student, he admits that he struggled in his beginning stages of college because he was not aware of all the resources he had available to him. As stated earlier the different stigmas Huynh faced as an Asian American did not allow him to feel comfortable asking for help. However, he found a mentor and she helped introduce him to many resources.

Another challenge Asian Americans and other minority first-generation students face is struggling with their racial identity and being a college student. While students attend college away from home it can be difficult to juggle all their different identities at once which causes them to pick the identity that is most suitable for the specific environment they are in. For minorities, this can be tricky because when they go home family may view them as becoming Americanized or "whitewashed" Huynh (2019). This identity crisis makes it hard for minorities to know which parts of their identity they want to keep and which parts to abandon. This just creates more stress while transitioning into college.

Huynh (2019) provides recommendations for colleges to follow to help first-generation Asian Americans. The list of recommendations can be applied to all first-generation college students as well. Many first-generation students do not know where their financial aid offices are located especially if they did not take a tour of the campus. Due to the fact that many first-generation student's parents never attended college their parents might not know the purpose and importance of financial aid officers therefore cannot offer any help. Huynh (2019) suggests it would be a good idea for financial aid and multicultural services to go to first year classes and introduce themselves/ talk about what their jobs are and where to find them on campus so first year college students and first-generation students can find them and use them as a resource.

Huynh (2019) believes institutions should help their students by normalizing faculty reaching out to the students rather than students seeking help.

Many students struggle with the need to ask for help and feel overwhelmed, not only can school cause mental health issues but issues with family members once first-generation students attend college can be a factor as well. Institutions and student affairs practitioners need to encourage students to use the resources available to them by creating a culture of interdependence, help-seeking, and mentorship as a way to help first-generation college students succeed (Stephens et al., 2012). One way to do this can be by validating students and listening to their experiences and the feelings they have about everything in their college experience.

It is a common fact that minorities are more likely to drop out of college than White students. Baker and Robnett (2012) investigate this topic by examining the process of integrating into college. As previously mentioned in Huynh's study many minorities have a hard time transitioning into college so the integration period can be very stressful and sometimes overwhelming. Baker and Robnett examined the precollege and college experience of first-year college students by collecting year-long data in the spring of 2004 through the fall of the following year (2012). Students were asked a series of demographic questions about their precollege experiences. The questions included: gender, family income, US birth, US birth of parents, and language background. Students were also asked about the type of high school attended, high school grade point average (GPA), and combined SAT score. For responses collected precollege, data suggested Latinos were significantly more likely than Asian Americans to have been born in the US and to have both parents born in the US; however, Latinos were less likely than Blacks and Whites to have been born in the US and to speak English as their first language. Whites had significantly higher high school GPA and SAT scores than Latinos; Asian Americans also had significantly higher SAT scores than Latinos (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

The results of Baker and Robnett's study suggest that, regardless of the differences in academic preparation for college, the experiences that are encountered once in college are important for the success of minority students. Social support from within the college environment appears to play a vital role in the retention of underrepresented minority college students. Social support from within the college environment appears to be important for the retention of minority students and may explain the difference in retention between Black and Latino students. Black students in this study were more likely than Latino students to have connections with others on campus (Baker & Robnett, 2012).

Transitioning To College

Another major topic of study is the difficulties faced by students as they transition to college. Clark (2015) conducted a study that focused on eight, second-semester freshman students. The students chosen were (18-19 years old), first-time college students. Clark's findings suggest that students' college transition experience includes an active process of strategizing (2015). Data revealed that students encountered challenges both inside and outside the college experience. Each challenge included its own set of influences, which also existed inside and/or outside the college environment. Students responded by devising strategies to address those challenges and accommodate the related influences (Clark, 2005). Specifically, Clark finds that the participants had a hard time with decision making and were unaware of sources outside of the classroom. Maintaining ongoing contact with students during the second semester could allow seminar leaders to be more effective in helping students recognize challenges, including ongoing challenges from the first semester or challenges that do not present themselves until the second semester (Clark, 2005).

Huynh (2019) and Baker and Robnett (2012) suggest that mentorship/ guidance at the college level benefits college students. From his personal experience, Huynh points to the importance of the mentorship he received as central to his ability to navigate the college experience and eventually graduate (2019). Baker & Robnett also argue that mentorship is likely to help retention and graduation rates for first-generation students (2012).

The Current Study

The research question is: What barriers impede first-generation college students' from graduating? It was hypothesized that the more support first-generation students had from people on campus the more likely they will be to feel comfortable on campus and do well academically. Additionally, they were asked about the different barriers they have faced prior to college, how they have gotten to college, and barriers they faced once arriving at the institution.

The participants were recruited from a predominantly white (72%) private liberal arts 4-year institution located in rural Wisconsin. At the time of the study approximately 21% of the student body was identified as first-generation. To participate in the current study participants needed to be (1) a first-generation college student (2) who is 18 years of age or older, and (3) have completed one full semester of college while currently still enrolled for the following semester. The current study was open to all majors as long as they met the three previously

stated requirements.

Methods

Design

The current study utilizes qualitative methods, specifically in-depth structured interviews of 15 first-generation college students. The objective of this study is to hear personal descriptions of first-generation college students transition and matriculation barriers into college. The interviews asked 34 questions that focused on life at home, the transition into college, social support at college, and financial barriers (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Instagram, and Snapchat. Many of the participants responded to the post and volunteered to be a part of the study. Other participants were recruited through word of mouth. Participants were given informed consent forms to read and sign prior to the interview taking place. The informed consent form let them know they were not obligated to answer questions if they did not want to, and they were able to leave at any time during the interview. Before the interviews took place, participants were asked to state the definition of what it means to be a first-generation college student to ensure all participants had a similar understanding of the term and that their understanding was similar to the current studies definition of a first-generation college student. After finishing the interview. The participants were thanked for their time. All interviews were conducted in person with each lasting approximately twenty minutes. The interviews were audio recorded using a hand-held voice recorder and then transcribed and analyzed.

Coding

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the interviews. There are 6 steps to follow when using this specific analysis concept: Learn the data, create coding categories, look for themes, review the themes, define the themes, and write a report (Braun & Clark, 2006). After following the 6 steps above the main themes that were found dealt with: race, having sibling, athletic participation, and distance from home. These themes contributed to barriers in five main areas: Upbringing and homelife, transitioning to college life, financial support systems, social supports and connections, and life on campus.

Results

Participants

The current study consisted of 15 first-generation students who were 80% (12) female and 20% (3) male. Participants had an age range from 18-25 years old ($M = 21$). The racial breakdown was 53% (8) White, 26% (4) Hispanic, 13% (2) African-American, and 6% (1) Native American. .06% (1) of participants were first-year college students, 13% (2) were second year students, 60% (9) of participants were third year students and 2% (3) were fourth year students. Student athletes accounted for 53% (8) of the participants, with nonathletes making up 47% (7) of participants.

The primary results of the study will be reported in the following order: upbringing and home life, transitioning to college, financial support systems, social support system.

Upbringing and Homelife

When participants were asked if their parents encouraged them to attend college 93% said yes. All participants who answered yes said their parents encouraged them to go to college so they would not struggle or have to live paycheck to paycheck like their parents. Participant 15 said "My parents encouraged me only because they didn't want me to have to work hard like them." Only 6% of participants said that their parents did not encourage them to attend college stating financial concerns as their parents' reason for not encouraging them. Participant 14 said "No, my mom wanted me to join the army because it'll help pay for college. For her it's all about the money."

Participants were then asked if they had mentors to help with the college selection and planning process. Forty percent of participants reported not having a mentor. Participant 16 said "No. I didn't because my school waited until senior year to be proactive and help us, but by senior year it's too late so I did most of it on my own." The other 60% of participants said they had a mentor with three participants reporting that they had counselors through the College Possible program. Participant 11 said "I guess I did, but they were through College Possible. I feel bad for the kids who didn't sign up because my school lowkey sucked with helping us. My school had a counselor but they were not the easiest to get in touch with."

Transitioning to College Life

When participants were asked how they felt about attending a college away from home the most common answers were "excited" or "happy." Even though respondents were universally excited

to be going to college, there was a difference in the degree of concern expressed about attending college between minority respondents and White respondents. A common answer among the minorities along with being excited was also “nervous,” “scared,” or “worried.” Minorities stated they felt this way because they were scared of how they were going to be treated once they got to campus. Participant 9 responded to the question by saying “Specifically I was worried about it being at a predominantly white institution (PWI) and being a big black African American man. I was worried about racism at the time. I did not know what to expect or if I was going to be accepted.” While minority students were concerned about how they would be treated or how they would fit in at a PWI, White students concerns centered around being away from home. For example, a white participant responded to the same question with “Just being homesick and not really being able to go home.”

All participants who played on a sports team found that it made the transition to college easier because they had teammates to mingle with when they arrived instead of waiting to attend freshman orientation. Being an athlete made them feel like they were a part of campus life and helped them meet people. All athletes said that they believe if they did not play a sport, it would have been harder for them to make friends. One athlete even said they would have transferred if it were not participating in an intercollegiate sport. Participant 5 for example, answered by saying “I’m super thankful that I had friends already (coming to campus due to summer group chats with teammates). With my team I think it is tough to make friends outside of that. We already have one big thing in common and we spend so much time together.” Participant 12 when asked about if they felt they belonged on campus said “I play basketball so I just hang out with my team. I’m not involved in a lot of other things, but I still feel like I belong.”

Financial Support Systems

Participants were also asked “Do you feel comfortable asking your parents for academic or financial help while you are away at school?” The students who felt the most uncomfortable asking for help are students who had siblings. These are also the students who had the most financial difficulty and felt guilty for leaving home to go away to college. When participant 14 was asked this question, they responded with “Yeah but not financially. They do not have money to survive themselves and they can barely make it with my siblings still needing them. They are not just going to hand over money. I would never ask them for money. I will

never try to buy something I cannot afford. If I ever ask them for money that’s a real low for me.” Participant 10 said “Not really. Mostly if I have trouble financially, I do not tell them about it at all. We will be talking and they will be like ‘what did you eat today’ and I’d say a slice of pizza when really, I just straight up lied and ate a potato. So yeah, I am not going to ask them because I know my mom just started working at Walmart like 2 months ago. I know she barely had any income then the stimulus came and child support relief for my little brother and sister and I was like thank God they have that.” For those who said they felt comfortable asking for assistance a common response was “I definitely feel comfortable asking my parents for help because I know if I need it they’ll give it to me. I will never just ask to ask.”

When asked about if they felt pressure to stop attending college and go home, 66% responded no and 33% responded they did feel that pressure. Of the 33% of participants who said they felt this pressure the pressure came in the form of financial and familial concerns. Participant 3 answered by saying “We live day by day and me being far away is a lot of expense. Sometimes I just want to go home and get a job and go to a school closer to home because it will be so much cheaper.”

Year in school affected whether they understood financial aid and if they had a mentor. When asking students if they understood financial aid the 53% who said yes stated they did not understand it their freshman year, but they have a better understanding now. No one fully understands the free application for federal student aid (FAFSA) paperwork or process, but all participants understood it needed to be completed before the academic year in order to receive financial aid. Participant 7 said “No I do not understand any of those documents at all. I just sign my name where they [the paper] tell me to and hope for the best.” Participant 8 responded by saying “No my mom does it.” All participants who reported understanding the FAFSA documents have completed at least one full academic year.

Eighty-six percent of participants said they feel they can pay for all four years of college (with the help of loans). Everyone, with the exception of one participant, said they will be relying on student loans in order to afford all 4 years of school. The one participant who does not need student loans has an academic scholarship that covers all of their expenses. The remaining 13% said they will not be able to pay for all four years of college because they are trying their best to not have any debt and do not want to take out student loans. Participant 6 said “I am having a hard time paying for it now, so no.” When asked what they do to be able to afford

college 66% of participants said they work during the summer and school year to pay for college, 22% reported only work during the summer. Only 13% of respondents reported not working at all.

Social Supports and Connections

When asked if they felt comfortable talking with their professors 66% reported they did and only 34% reported they did not. Participant 7 said “Yes, I feel like they are really approachable so it makes it easier for me to email them or stay after class.” Of the 33% who felt uncomfortable talking to their instructors, participant 12 said “Sometimes I don’t have questions but when I do, I just feel too weird approaching any of my teachers. All my education classes I’m comfortable, my math classes I felt are just crazy hard so I feel like to fully understand it I need a lot of help. I just go to other students and the internet.” All participants who did not feel comfortable said it wasn’t anything against their teachers they would prefer to send an email than approach them after class or during office hours because they never formed an actual relationship with their professors.

When asked if they had friends at the college that they felt comfortable talking to, 33% of participants said they did not have friends they felt comfortable talking to. The other 67% said they do have friends they feel comfortable talking to when they were asked. Seventy percent of the people who answered yes to this question were athletes. Participant 10 said “I used to my freshman year then they all left and did not come back. I have people I talk to, but I do not go full in depth.”

When participants were asked if they felt like a part of their campus only 33% said yes, 20% said no, 33% said they felt a mixture of both (being a part and not being a part of the school) and 13% of participants were undecided. Participant 12 who is an athlete said “I play basketball so I just hang out with my team. I’m not involved in a lot of other things but I still feel like I belong.” Participant 2 who is not an athlete said “I do within reason. It’s like I am not in the center like some people are. I’m like on the outskirts of it. I don’t want to be in that deep center. Not at all, I want to be on the sides.” Participant 6 who said they did not feel like they were a part of campus said “I was thinking about transferring last semester because I was working so much from freshman year, I didn’t really form a lot of connections so especially coming back this year it was kind of like woah I’m not working as much I don’t know what to do with my time. I feel like I kind of found my group now but it’s still really not set in stone.” Participant 10 who said they felt as if they were and were not a part of campus said “In a way yes because I feel like everyone knows

me and they let me be myself but I don’t have the friend group or deep people that I can have conversations with.” Participant 5 who was undecided said “I don’t know. I guess I feel like I am because I’m here working to get a degree and like that’s mainly what everyone comes to do. I guess like that’s the point of college.” All participants said they felt more connected when they received emails about on campus events and attended them. All off campus participants said they felt disconnected from everyone else due to them having jobs and not being able to attend most events. Participant 14 who lived off campus said “I did when I lived on campus. Living off campus I don’t.” When they were asked what would make them feel connected, they responded with “The emails make me feel connected for sure. I know I will not be able to attend anything due to the fact I work so many hours but just knowing what’s going on makes me feel good. I do not think any social supports will make a difference for me.”

Life on Campus

When participants were asked if their college experience matched their expectations 20% said yes, 60% said no, and 20% of the participants had no expectations. Participant 5 said their expectations matched what they are experiencing “Pretty much spending most of your day doing schoolwork. Because school is like your job when you are here then on the weekends going out and hanging out with friends.” Participant 2 whose experience is also matching what they expected said “It is because I am an older student if I was younger, I would probably be disappointed. If I would have come here when I was younger, I would not like it.” When asked why would it have been different if they were younger they replied by saying “I was definitely a partier back then and this is not a party school.” Participant 8 related by saying “Well my freshman year, I went to a bigger school so I have a different idea of what college should be like. Coming here because it is a smaller school it feels like it is a bigger high school.”

When asked if they ever thought about leaving the college 88% of participants said they have thought about leaving. The main reasons stated for considering leaving were financial and the school not having their intended major. Although students felt they would be able to pay for school with the help of student loans, many were not sure if they wanted to accumulate mounds of student loan debt. This is what caused them to think about leaving. The financial reasons varied considerably with participant 5 saying “Just that it’s like I don’t know what I am doing and it is like I could get a job that doesn’t need a degree. I could be getting paid instead of doing this because to be honest I don’t even know

if I'm going to use my degree when I graduate, and school is just so expensive." However, participant 15 said "Yeah I was struggling academically and financially. There is no point of me paying so much to go to school and I'm barely passing." The other major reason given for thinking about leaving the college is exemplified by participant 11 who wanted to transfer due to their major not being offered and who said "There is a point where I wanted to go to college by my family but the school was lying in a way. They said they had so many things but at the same time they don't even have that. Then they were saying how you could easily transfer but you really have to go back a whole year."

The last question participants were asked is "Are there things their school could have done to make it easier for them and what are they?" The question was open ended but 26% of participants agreed faculty could have had better communication with incoming students.

Participant 12 answered by saying "Being able to communicate with administration or meet with them easier. I think a lot of times if I email people from administration they take a while to get back to you. Having more open communication would be beneficial for students. They could definitely explain stuff better freshman year, and when I say stuff, I am really thinking about FAFSA." Participant 15 also said "Just the communication between faculty people and I guess the business people or the dean of students residential life. There is a lot of miscommunication between everyone. I could try to reach someone and never get an answer or try."

Discussion

The primary research question for the current study was: How does being a first-generation college student affect your transition into college? After analyzing all 15 participants' answers it is apparent that race, participants academic year, and whether participants were student athletes had a huge impact on their transition and connections at college. Due to the review of literature, it was hypothesized that the more support first-generation students had from people on campus the more likely they will be to feel more comfortable on campus.

The results this study suggested that race affected first-generation students transition to college. Minorities were more likely to be worried about racism upon arrival, not feel comfortable asking their parents for help, feel pressure to stop attending, and more nervous to go to college away from home. White participants were more likely to be home sick and felt comfortable asking parents for help. Participants academic year affected how centered they felt on campus whether it be with peers, professors, or

faculty. The more years students spent at the institution the more likely they developed better relationships on campus. This also determined how well they understood financial aid documents. In addition, being an athlete had a huge effect on the student's connection to the college. Athletes were more likely to have better relationships on campus and feel a part of campus life. Participation in a sport definitely helped with the social aspect of transitioning to college.

The results of the current study support findings from previous literature. In Lyons research they found first-generation college students are very likely to suffer from financial stress which affects students' graduation rates (2004). Results also mentioned that first-generation students have a hard time understanding FAFSA. Although none of the participants in the current study dropped out of college many thought about leaving due to financial concerns.

Many also had a hard time understanding FAFSA documents especially during their freshman year. Although some participants may have faced financial hardship all participants in the study are students who decided they were definitely coming back to campus.

In Gibbons and Woodside's (2014) research it is shown that students feel they have to attend college or go straight into the workforce. The results suggested that many students decided to go to college because they saw how not attending college affected their parents. The current study also shows that all participants felt it was "expected" of them to attend school or get a job. Participants whose parents encouraged them to go said their parents encouraged them to attend because they did not want the participants to "end up like them."

Participants who were minorities in the current study said they were nervous to attend a PWI because they were not sure how they were going to be treated or if they would fit in. Huynh (2019) mentioned a stage in which minorities endure an identity crisis. Minority respondents in the current study do not mention identity crises but they do mention experiencing a culture shock upon arrival to college. All minorities in the study grew up in urban areas, they all expressed how attending a PWI in rural Wisconsin was a new experience. When minority students were asked if there was anything they had to adjust to upon arriving at college, many minority students responded that they had to get used to no longer being surrounded by people who look like them.

The results of Baker and Robnett's study suggest that experiences once minorities get to college are more impactful than academic preparation (2012).

Both the Baker and, Robnett (2012) and Huynh's (2019) studies show that social support from colleges help minority students. In the current study social supports are beneficial for all first-generation students, not just minorities. Results show that respondents were more likely to feel comfortable talking to teachers and understand FAFSA if they had a mentor on campus.

The current study indicates that all first-generation students are benefitted by having financial support systems, and mentors to help build connections around campus. The current study also showcases how student athletes have an easier time transitioning to college. Although all first-generation students need mentors, minority first-generation students are more likely to need the most help with each barrier they face: social, financial, racial etc.

Participants were asked what social supports would make them feel like they are more involved on campus and all answers involved inclusivity, participants described parties or having more diversity. First-generation students would feel better if they were able to connect with other students in more neutral events held on campus rather than being confined to a group of students attending an outdoor orientation trip at the beginning of freshman year. Participants were also asked what their college could have done to make the transition to college easier and there were a few common answers that centered around communication. Respondents believe that it will be less pressure on them if faculty reached out to them during first semester of freshman year. This will allow students to know all their resources and feel more comfortable reaching out for help when they need it.

Limitations and Future Directions

The current study was held in the midst of a pandemic in which the college could not hold events. The lack of events may have impacted participants feelings, especially the one participant who is a first-year student. The pandemic also had an effect on the small sample size. Another limitation is that only first-generation students who decided to stay for another semester were included in the study. Therefore, it is possible that there may be additional barriers that caused others to leave the school that were not addressed by those who decided to stay. For this reason, more research should be conducted on those who decided to leave. For example, a true longitudinal study that tracks both those who decide to leave and those who decide to stay could be beneficial to better understanding barriers that face all first-generation students.

Conclusion

The current study has shown first-generation college students face social, racial, and financial barriers. Participants agreed the social transition could have been easier if there were more events on campus that brought everyone together. A few participants even mentioned having events with people who are in the same major to give students a chance to network and build connections within their area of study.

Participants believed that the racial transition will always be hard. Race is not a factor that only defines how you will be treated when you transition to college but anywhere you go. Participants felt it would help if they were surrounded by more people who looked like them, having a diversity club and advertising it to incoming freshmen can help minority students feel more comfortable on campus, especially minorities who are also first-generation students.

The financial barrier stems from high school. A few participants explained that their high schools held classes explaining what FAFSA is, and that helped them have a better understanding of the documents. Colleges should have these classes to teach freshman about how to fill out FAFSA documents, and why it is important. Participants felt their resources in the financial aid department at their college was not advertised enough and this is a contributing factor to why they struggled.

Communication between faculty and students is a major key in helping first-generation students feel comfortable on campus and also understanding the resources they are given while at school. Many participants were too shy to talk to their professors. The current study shows that being a student athlete makes the social transition much easier for first-generation college students. More events on campus, and better connections between faculty and students help with the social and racial transition to college. Lastly, the more educated students are on FAFSA whether it be from high school classes, a college class or, a member from financial aid office reaching out it is more likely they will be able to understand their FAFSA documents.

The current study has showcased many needs first-generation college students face upon arrival to campus. The final goal of this research is to help faculty and non-first-generation college students understand different barriers first-generation college students face and how we can all be of assistance to them as they continue to navigate through college.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Demographics

1. Age?
2. Ethnicity?
3. Where are you from?

Upbringing/home life

1. Describe your family situation
2. What does your parent/guardian do for a living?
3. What made you want to go to college?
4. Did your parent(s) / guardian(s) encourage you to go to college? Tell me more about that. Do you have any specific career goals?

Transition into college

1. Did you have HS counselors that helped with college selection or planning?
2. Did you have a mentor in HS that encourage you to go to college? Tell me about them.
3. What sorts of feelings did you have about attending college away from home?
4. Were you worried about anything in particular?
5. Did/Do your parents support your decision to go off to college?
6. Do you ever feel pressure to stop going to school and help out back home?
7. Do you feel comfortable asking your parents for help while you are at school? (could be financial assistance or a question about classes, etc.).

Support system:

1. Do you use services like tutoring, advising, counseling, diversity center, etc.? Why? Why not?

Financial

1. Do you understand the documents you received from financial aid?
2. Do you feel you will be able to pay for all 4 years of school?
3. What do you have to do to afford School? (work during summer, work during year, etc.)
4. What expenses concern you most while you are attending school?

Academic

1. Do you talk to your instructors outside of class? Why?/Why not?
2. What types of assignments do you work hardest to complete? Reading, writing, exams, etc.

Social

1. Do you have a mentor(s) here at Northland?
Student, staff, faculty?
 - a. What do you do with them?
 - b. How have they helped you?
2. Do you have friends that you feel comfortable talking about stuff with?
3. Do you feel part of Northland?
4. What type of social supports would make you feel better about being a student here?

Life here at Northland

1. Did your idea of college match what you are experiencing now?
2. Have you ever thought about leaving Northland? Why?
3. What made you decide to stay?
4. Are there things you had to learn or things you had to adjust to get along here?
5. If you could change one thing about Northland what would it be?
6. Are there things that Northland could have done to make things easier for you? What are they?
- 7.