BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS: FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AND COLLEGE SUCCESS

By: Lauren Falcon

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Graduating high school students across the nation are faced with deciding whether to continue their education or enter the workforce. Many seek higher education in order to improve career opportunities and gain economic prosperity and social mobility (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). The College Board claims that the average annual income for individuals who have a baccalaureate degree is $53, 976. The unemployment rate among these graduates is 4.7 percent, which is lower than the U.S. unemployment rate of 6.7 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). While these statistics look promising, the opportunity to go to college and obtain a degree is not immediately apparent to all students.

College provides a pathway for students to explore themselves and their interests, to expand their social and cultural experiences, and to build a more promising career. While higher education is rich in diversity and rewards, it can be particularly arduous for first-generation college students (FGCS). Historically, postsecondary education opportunities have been limited for certain ethnic and racial populations and for those of lower socioeconomic status (SES) (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Factors that have helped first-generation college students include school integration, government assistance programs, and a population shift that has increased minority presence in schools (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). During their time in college, however, FGCS confront distinctive challenges, including lack of college readiness, financial stability, familial support, and self-esteem. Despite these barriers, FGCS can succeed in college (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; PrĂłspero, Russell, & Vohra-Gupta, 2012). The common denominators of success include participation in high school and college

preparation programs, college assimilation, familial support, and positive personal characteristics (Hudley et al., 2009; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014; Wilkins, 2014).

Obstacles First-Generation College Students Face

Many obstacles affect the FGCS enrollment and graduation rate. A 2001 National Center for Education Statistics study found that among students whose parents had completed high school, 54 percent enrolled in college immediately after graduation, while only 36 percent of students whose parents had less than a high school diploma immediately entered college (Balemian & Feng, 2013).

Obstacles FGCS face include lack of college readiness, familial support, and financial stability. Racial underrepresentation, low academic self-esteem, and difficulty adjusting to college can manifest while enrolled, contributing to a lower rate of college completion than that for students who have at least one parent with a four-year degree (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

College Readiness

College readiness is defined as the academic and practical knowledge needed to be successful in higher education (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). High percentages of FGCS are from low-income families and attend low-performing PreK-12 schools (Hudley et al., 2009). Many low-performing schools do not have enough highly qualified teachers and are often underfunded; this, in turn, affects the quality of education many FGCS receive. Research indicates that first-generation SAT and ACT test-takers tend to have less core academic preparation and score lower than later-generation test-takers (Balemian & Feng, 2013). SAT/ACT scores, along with high school GPA, serve as predictors of college persistence and academic success in college.

There is a lack of familiarity with the importance of high school curriculum and how it relates to college preparation and readiness among FGCS parents (Gamez-Vargas & Oliva, 2013). FGCS parents are less likely to demand that their child do well in school or take advanced placement courses. A combination of these factors affects FGCS college readiness. Many FGCS do not know how the college system works or how to apply to college, receive financial aid, or choose a major. Further, this population is less likely to know the difference between various higher education institutions, and may select one that does not suit specific educational needs and goals (Arnold, Lu, & Armstrong, 2012).

Unfamiliar with the rigor and expectations of the college curriculum, parents of FGCS may be unable, and at times unwilling, to help their child to adequately prepare for college. The FGCS must, therefore, rely on high school personnel and peers for guidance and information (Hudley et al., 2009). This may be problematic since FGCS spend less time talking with high school personnel about their college aspirations than do students with college-educated parents. It is rare for high school

staff to discourage college aspirations or limit access among students of color and low-income students (Hudley et al., 2009), but when they do, FGCS are forced to rely on themselves for academic success.

Financial Challenges

Part of the decision to attend college involves answering the question, "How am I going to pay for this?" If the prospective student does not know how the financial system works, this can be a daunting question. Many FGCS come from a low SES and may lack the financial knowledge and resources that students with college-educated parents have. It is not uncommon for FGCS to work full time while going to school due to loans and family dependence on their income (Bers & Schuetz, 2014). Employment may interfere with time dedicated to class, homework, and school engagements that are critical to success. Many FGCS leave college so they can work more hours to support themselves or their family, or because college is not economically feasible.

Racial Disparity

Racial and ethnic disparity is well documented over the course of U.S. history and has been the subject of many studies, and postsecondary education is no exception. Pitre and Pitre (2009) explained that, "Over several decades in the United States, African American, Hispanic, Native American, and low-income students have completed high school and attended college at consistently lower rates than their White and higher income student counterparts" (p. 98). "In 2008, White students comprised 63 percent of students enrolling in postsecondary education, a proportion 4.5, 5.25, and 9 times greater than their Black, Hispanic, and Asian peers (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013 p. 47). Around forty percent of Hispanic and African American college students graduate with a four-year degree, whereas over fifty-five percent of White and Asian students graduate nationwide (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013). Despite increases in the U.S. minority population from 22 percent to 43 percent between 1972 and 2006 (Pitre & Pitre, 2009), the underrepresentation of minorities in college and those who persist to graduation still exists.

Lack of Self-esteem, College Adjustment, and Family Support

First-generation students may feel uncomfortable in the collegiate atmosphere. They may come from a different cultural background or SES and have different levels of college preparation than their college-going peers. Reasons for limited communication and interactions among peers and faculty include the absence of similar interests, experiences, and resources. These differences contribute to low levels of academic self-esteem and difficulty adjusting to the college setting.

First-generation students often require developmental coursework and tend to have lower grade point averages than their peers with college-educated parents (Huerta, Watt, & Reyes 2012). This results in lack of confidence in their own ability to be academically competitive and successful. In many interviews with minority FGCS, they discuss feeling that their non-minority peers question whether they have the grades to have earned admission into college (Wilkins, 2014). An African

American student interviewed by Wilkins (2014) stated, "Non-Black students assumed that all Black students benefitted from non-merit based admissions programs, even though most did not" (p. 184). Minority students may face the stigma that their college admittance is based solely on affirmative action, rather than their academic abilities (ASHE, 2013). This factor also contributes to low academic self-esteem and feeling of alienation from peers.

Having less exposure to the college-going culture causes difficulty in assimilating into the college setting both academically and socially. FGCS are more likely to struggle to find their place and may feel left out (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). "Perceptions of a hostile climate, negative student-faculty interactions, and limited cross-racial communications can have counteractive effects to a FGCS's academic self-concept and sense of belonging, which may lead to dropping out" (ASHE, 2013 p. 51). FGCS also tend to cause their own estrangement by not separating from their families to become more socially engaged with the college culture (Boden, 2011).

Lack of family support is another issue for many FGCS. While parents of FGCS have a range of personal opinions about college, many low-income parents view college as a venture for the rich (Korsmo, 2014) and may look upon their child's desire to go to college as offensive or arrogant. Furthermore, whether they support their children's college aspirations or not, parents without college experience may not understand the amount of time and academic focus required. This can lead to insufficient levels of emotional support or limited understanding of the commitment necessary for a student to thrive in college (Sparkman, Maulding, & Roberts, 2012). The result is that FGCS may begin to consider taking a lighter academic load or dropping out.

Factors That Contribute to First-Generation College Student Success

Despite the obstacles that FGCS face, 23 percent obtain an associate's or certificate and 24 percent achieve a bachelor's or higher (Chen, 2005). Multiple elements contribute to the success of these students and are the subject of discussion in much of the literature (Bers & Schuetz, 2014; Boden, 2011; Hudley et al., 2009; Pitre & Pitre, 2009; PrĂłspero, Russell, & Vohra-Gupta, 2012; Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014; Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Wilkins, 2014). Contributing factors include levels of participation in high school and college readiness programs, as well as academic and social integration, personal characteristics, and family support. Most successful FGCS report that a combination of these factors helps them finish college and obtain a degree.

Research shows a relationship between a student's level of high school involvement and college success (Hudley et al., 2009). FGCS can be active in high school college-readiness programs, make connections with school professionals, or surround themselves with like-minded people. Supportive peer relationships are connected to the continued pursuit of academic goals and school-appropriate behavior (Hudley et al., 2009). When students surround themselves with other students who have the same educational aspirations, they receive support and opportunities to grow. During these

encounters, FGCS develop academic skills and learn how to navigate social encounters with other students who are going to college (Hudley et al., 2009). FGCS also see their college-bound peers interacting with school personnel and feel more comfortable asking for help in regards to college.

Participation in college-readiness programs also helps FGCS in their pursuit of a college education. "Fifty years ago, the Federal Higher Education Act was passed, and the U.S. Department of Education instituted the first federally supported education programs designed to increase the college enrollment and completion rates of economically disadvantaged and underrepresented ethnic background students" (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, p. 96). The federally funded TRIO Programs and nonprofit Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) are examples of programs that provide FGCS college preparation, support during the application process, and tutoring to ease the transition between high school and college (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Involvement in these types of programs increases opportunities for FGCS to learn about financial aid and college entrance requirements, and to develop social and academic skills necessary for college.

Additionally, some colleges offer programs that support minorities in their pursuit of education. "FGCS need psychological resources that support the belief that people who have backgrounds like theirs deserve to attend college and can thrive there" (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014, p. 944). Intervention from culturally competent programs that focus on differences in achievement motivation among diverse racial minorities provide valuable educational support (PrĂłspero, Russell, & Vohra-Gupta, 2012). These programs are able to address barriers and tap into the motivations to go to college that are particular to a certain group. While not many programs exist, intervention has a proven to have a positive effect on college success (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

College Assimilation and Family Support

Many FGCS go to college not knowing how to fit into the culture of a higher education setting. Finding support organizations, work-study jobs, and friends in college increases the level of individuals' social integration in college. There appears to be a correlation between positive social/academic assimilation, family support, and FGCS college success. Students with high college social integration have greater college enrollment and retention (Sommerfeld & Bowen, 2013), and FGCS who develop academic confidence and a sense of belonging in the student community via integration succeed at higher rates.

Crucial interactions also occur with professors and other school personnel. Positive initial engagements with college personnel, advisors, and staff create FGCS confidence during the transition into college (Bers & Schuetz, 2014), and instructors who are helpful, accessible, and motivational increase FGCS' connection to college (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014). These academic interactions also contribute to higher grades and academic success.

Along with college social capital and positive academic relationships, FGCS are more likely to be educationally successful with family support. Most FGCS perceive college as a way to acquire job-specific skills and credentials (Wilkins, 2014). Typically among FGCS there is a strong sense of familial obligation, and students often express an aspiration to pursue careers that will increase their ability to become financially independent and assist their families (Boden, 2011). FGCS perform better in college when family members are willing to help financially, take on more household responsibility, and provide moral support and encouragement (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes, & Klingsmith, 2014).

Personal Characteristics and Self-Efficacy

Due to social and familial circumstances, FGCS develop the problem-solving skills to navigate the college process on their own. FGCS often describe themselves as hard working, goal oriented, independent, and mature (Wilkins, 2014). One student expressed, "It's hard, it's expensive to go to school, so when you have it, you have to take it serious" (Wilkins, 2014, p. 182). Another valuable quality is self-efficacy; students who believe they are capable of being academically successful are more likely to engage in learning strategies that lead to better academic performance (Naumann, Bandalos, & Gutkin, 2003). Confidence and personal qualities play an active role in persistence and academic performance necessary for college success.

Despite distinctive, often numerous obstacles, a growing number of FGCS attain college success with a combination of college readiness, college culture assimilation, family support, and personal characteristics. Through interventions initiated by colleges and high schools, FGCS can find resources to develop these attributes and overcome their challenges.

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Lauren Falcon is pursuing a master's degree in counseling from Sul Ross State University Rio Grande College.

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