

**Peer Tutoring with First-Generation College Students:
A Qualitative Multi-Case Study**

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A dissertation submitted to the
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at
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of the requirements for the degree of
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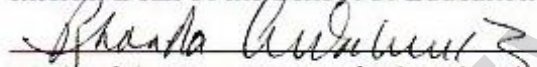
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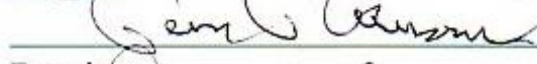
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my wonderful wife, Christina, and my awesome kids: Reina, Elisa, and Joaquin. Thank you for all of the “Dissertation Dedication Time” with me. Remain positive, stay calm, work hard, and always do your best in everything you do in life; seize each opportunity and take hold of your future success.

PREVIEW

Acknowledgments

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Mom and Dad, thank you for your unconditional love as you watched me grow and play in the backyard and applauded me when I graduated with my undergraduate and graduate degrees. I love you, Dad.

Abstract

There are ongoing changes in the demographics of at-risk students in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). One significant group reflecting this demographic shift is an increased number of first-generation college students, defined by The U.S. Department of Education, through the Higher Education Act (2011) as “An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (p. 9). First-generation college students tend to be less academically prepared, as compared to peers whose parents graduated from college (Engle, Bermeo, & O’Brien, 2006). Academic support resources, such as national peer tutoring certified programs, may be helpful to increase success to this population. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students with peer tutoring to better understand the value of peer tutoring as perceived by these students. This study used a multiple case study approach to examine peer tutoring programs at two four-year, private colleges and one community college. These institutions have nationally certified peer tutoring program, accredited by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and endorsed by The Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA). Data was collected using interviews, by making observations, and from documents used in these peer tutoring programs. It was the intent of this study to identify the effective and ineffective attributes of these peer tutoring programs, as perceived by undergraduate first-generation college students. This study may inform similar programs that serve first-generation college students to better meet the needs of this at-risk population.

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PREVIEW

Chapter I. Statement of the Problem

This qualitative study used a multiple case study design to explore the components of academic tutoring programs. The primary data source consisted of interviews of first-generation college students engaged in peer tutoring. These students have been defined by The U.S. Department of Education, through the Higher Education Act (2011) as “An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (p. 9). Secondary data sources came from interviews with the peer tutors and the coordinators or directors of the peer tutoring programs, observations of tutoring sessions, and documents related to the peer tutoring programs. The study took place at two four-year, private colleges and one community college that have peer tutoring programs nationally certified by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) and endorsed by the Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA).

The selected colleges have full-time undergraduate students some of whom are first-generation college students. The criterion for the site selection included colleges that have first-generation students and offer a CRLA nationally accredited peer tutoring program. This design resulted in rich descriptions of peer tutoring programs (Merriam, 2009). The results of this study can be of benefit to student service professionals engaged in the development and delivery of academic support services to improve their programs, and, ultimately, benefit first-generation college students who will thereby receive improved tutoring services.

According to existing research (Berkner & Choy, 2008; Engle & Tinto, 2008), an increasing number of students entering college are first-generation college students. Research has shown that first-generation college students share various education characteristics compared with their peers whose parents have matriculated at a college or university (Choy, 2001; Engle et

al., 2006; Thayer, 2000). First-generation college students who begin at a baccalaureate institution enter college less academically prepared for college and have lower educational aspirations than their peers whose parents received bachelor's degrees (Choy, 2001). Moreover, nearly 24% of all undergraduate first-generation college students are from low-income families (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle & Tinto (2008) have found that low-income, first-generation college students are 26% more likely not to return to college after their first year compared with 7% of their peers.

Since only 25% of this population who are low-income enrolled in a baccalaureate college (Engle & Tinto, 2008), the significance of these students' successes or failures in relation to graduation (Chen, 2005; Engle et al., 2006) impacts whole communities rather than only individual students. Financial help has been made available, but it may not be the only help necessary to assist every student. In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Higher Education Act to provide funds for low-income families sending their children to college. In a speech made by President Johnson related to the passage of this Act, he informed the audience to convey to young people that if they worked hard, college could be a reality (Johnson, 1965). While attending higher education institutions may be possible as a result of this Act, success within these institutions may be more challenging for first-generation college students.

Some of the difficulties not addressed by the Higher Education Act are evident in graduation rates. While first-generation college students now represent a larger portion of the undergraduate student population (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Berkner & Choy, 2008), this at-risk group will graduate at a lower rate than their college peers. The National Center for Education Statistics estimates that from the number of students enrolled in post-secondary institutions, 27% are dependents of their parents and 58% are independent first-generation college students

(Berkner & Choy, 2008). Despite representing a large portion of the undergraduate student population, only 26% will earn Bachelor's degrees as compared to 68% of their peers whose parents went to college (Chen, 2005; Engle et al., 2006).

First-generation college students are considered at-risk for degree completion for a number of reasons (Vivian, 2005). According to Vivian (2005), first-generation college students "may be educationally underprepared, have greater financial constraints, and have less social and familial support than other students" (p. 338). Because first-generation college students begin their studies with greater academic and social needs as compared to their peers whose parents graduated from college, these needs may prevent them from graduating (Vivian, 2005).

First-generation college students have been found less academically prepared for their college experiences (Engle et al., 2006; Thayer, 2000). First-generation college students often take less challenging high school courses (Thayer, 2000). College students who completed advanced high school courses, such as rigorous math courses, increased the likelihood that they would enroll in a baccalaureate college and complete their degree (Chen, 2005; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000); however, many first-generation college students may be less academically prepared for college compared to their peers (Engle et al., 2006; Thayer, 2000). Furthermore, first-generation college students often may not attempt to take academic risks or put forth great effort because their level of self-efficacy is lower, compared to non-first-generation college students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Many first-generation college students are from low-income families, placing them at greater risk for attrition (Corrigan, 2003; Engle et al., 2006). First-generation college students often lack the financial resources from their families to sustain their education (Thayer, 2000). Therefore, first-generation college students tend to devote more time to working while attending

college. The need to maintain income contributes to the challenges they encounter to persist and succeed in higher education (Corrigan, 2003). Not only does working more reduce the amount of time available to study, but it also impacts the amount of time first-generation college students have to interact with college peers (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terrenzini, 2004).

First-generation college students may receive less encouragement from their families to prepare for or to attend college (Pascarella et al., 2004). Because parents of first-generation college students did not attend college or have experience with the college system, they are less likely to know how to pay for college expenses (Choy, 2001). Moreover, first-generation college students' parents are often unable to direct their children about how to develop a plan to receive the help that they need within the academic experience, which may result in their children's lack of cultural capital, which is a form of capital comprised of the skills and knowledge to make the educational experience beneficial and influential (Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition, these parents may not know how to direct their children to properly access essential resources on campus, resulting in their lack of social capital. According to Thayer (2000), social capital provides supportive resources to make a smooth transition for college students to earn a degree. Both social and cultural capital have been found to support the undergraduate student population's completion of a bachelor's degree (Pascarella et al., 2004).

Problem Statement

According to Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez (2001), "First-generation students were less likely than their peers whose parents had a bachelor's degree to be enrolled at their initial institution 3 years later and to stay on the persistence track to a bachelor's degree"

(p. 45). The intent of this study was to learn how academic support from nationally certified peer tutoring programs, specifically CRLA, may benefit this population with their persistence, success, and retention at four year colleges and one community college.

Some of the difficulty that first-generation college students encounter results from a lack of strong academic preparation when compared to their college peers (Engle et al., 2006). Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation college students are less likely to spend time studying or engaging in dialogue with their peers regarding academic work. While previous studies have researched peer involvement in college, especially for first-generation college students, as a beneficial way for students to learn how to succeed academically, according to Pascarella et al. (2004), there is a gap related to research on the efficacy of the peer tutoring training. This study explores three nationally certified peer tutoring programs as forms of support that may enable these students to graduate with a baccalaureate degree because the tutoring programs encourage regular study time and dialogue within peers about academics.

Research Question

The central question guiding this study was: How does participation in a peer tutoring program certified by the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) influence the experience of first-generation college students at either the baccalaureate or associate level?

The sub questions were:

- What academic skills and strategies do first-generation college students develop as a result of participation in the peer tutoring program?
- What types of social benefits are realized by first-generation college students as a result of participation in the peer tutoring program?
- What components of the peer tutoring program do students perceive as most beneficial?
- What components of the peer tutoring program do students perceive as least beneficial?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students participating in a nationally certified peer tutoring program. The intent of this study was to better understand the benefits, if any, and perceptions of participating undergraduate students. The purpose was accomplished through an exploration using interviews, observations, and documents of the peer tutoring program in which they are participating. The design enabled the researcher to listen and learn about the participants' experiences, as well as those of the peer tutors' and program coordinators' through interviews. Observations of peer tutoring sessions and a review of the tutoring programs' documents were used as additional data collection methods. The result was an in-depth review of each program using within-case and cross-case analysis guided by a system of inductive inquiry to generate patterns of meanings and themes related to peer tutoring at the selected institutions and the experiences of first-generation college students participating in those programs (Merriam, 2009). The findings of this study can build upon the scholarly literature related to first-generation college students and inform student services practitioners who provide academic support to first-generation college students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based upon three interrelated student development theories that are foundational to the field. The first of those theories related to the seminal research on student retention was by Tinto (1975, 1987). The second theory was based on the classic researcher of Astin (1984), whose work was related to the implications of student interactions with their peers. The final student development theory framing this study was based on the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education as identified by Chickering and Gamson (1987).

Tinto's (1987) theory of retention related to the combination of academic and social integration as students become accustomed to and persist in their academic careers at a university. Academic integration occurs when students are achieving in their classes, while social integration refers to students developing a sense of belonging and bonding with their peers for both academic and social reasons (Braxton, 2000). Both social and academic integration contribute to the success of college students (Tinto, 1987).

Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good practice in undergraduate school included: (a) encouragement of student-faculty, (b) encouragement of cooperation, (c) encouragement of active learning, (d) prompt feedback, (e) time on task, (f) communication of high expectations, and (g) respect for diverse talents and ways of knowing. By combining the social and academic concerns for college students, Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified the important role that academic support service personnel provide for students to be successful in higher education. Chickering and Gamson's (1987) principles for good practice outlined characteristics that a peer tutoring program can incorporate, such as having tutors encourage contact and cooperation among students, promote active learning on campus, and provide prompt feedback on student learning (Boylan, 2002).

Student development theories provide many student service professionals on campuses with a better foundation to better meet the needs of a growing and diverse student population, such as first-generation college students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). These theories can help college administrators understand students' personal development and academic growth, as well as how students are connected. By using these theories to help guide this ongoing study and the analysis of the data, new strategies may be revealed so that college administrators and support service providers can better meet the needs of first-generation college students.

Delimitations

Tutoring programs were limited to those having national certification from CRLA. This decision was based on the work of Maxwell (1990), who wrote about the benefits of peer tutoring programs that adhered to standards and guidelines established by CRLA. Higbee (2009) referred to Maxwell, “as a pioneer in the field of learning assistance and developmental education” (p.1). Maxwell (1990) stated that, “A well trained tutor can serve a vital role in helping fellow students attain their academic goals” (p. 1); therefore, training topics with peer tutors was one focus of the study.

Another area of focus was to observe how well peer tutors modeled or demonstrated problem solving strategies to their students. Bandura (1997) found that when a person observed someone complete a task through modeling of the task it helped to increase the person’s self-efficacy.

The decision to focus on selected colleges with nationally accredited programs was purposeful to ensure that comparable sites comprised each case. The criteria for the site selection were colleges that had full-time undergraduate students, some whom were first-generation college students. These institutions must also have an active and CRLA accredited peer tutoring program.

To capture the context of the participants’ experiences, the number of participants was limited to a student population that met the criteria set through purposive sampling. Participants were limited to those undergraduates who are first-generation college students and participated in the peer tutoring program. The participants were limited to students who were pursuing a bachelor’s degree.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is its potential benefit to student service practices, delivering peer tutoring to first-generation college students. The quality and type of academic support services related to peer tutoring are an important component to ensure the retention and success of the first-generation college students. According to Williams and Butler (2010), “It is critical for college administrators and practitioners to help these students to identify, understand, and develop coping skills to help resolve their unique stressors” (p. 4). This study may lead to a better understanding of one of these academic support services, which can advance the knowledge of student service personnel. This knowledge can also contribute to a greater understanding of first-generation college students and peer tutoring programs. This study may contribute to the development of techniques and procedures within a peer tutoring program that encourage persistence, retention, success, and graduation of first-generation students from a four-year, baccalaureate college or university.

Definitions of Terms

At-risk students—Students who “may be educationally underprepared, have greater financial constraints, and have less social and familial support than other students” (Vivian, 2005, p. 338).

Four-year Colleges—Colleges or universities at which undergraduate students complete their educational degrees and attain a bachelor’s degree.

Community Colleges—Colleges at which undergraduate students complete their educational degrees and attain their associate’s degree.

Council of Learning Assistance and Developmental Education Associations (CLADEA)—The national organization that represents and endorses the College Reading Language Association.

College Reading Learning Association (CRLA)—An organization recognized and endorsed by the National Association for Developmental Education (NADE) for its standards to train peer tutors at colleges.

Cultural Capital—A form of capital comprised of the skills and knowledge to make the educational experience beneficial and influential (Pascarella et al., 2004).

First-generation college students—“An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011, p. 9).

Peer tutor—A student who works with another student outside of class to reinforce a particular concept or skill, while demonstrating specific study strategies.

Persistence—The quality to meet academic and social challenges and persevere to reach a goal, such as earn an undergraduate degree.

Self-Efficacy—“Beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

Social Capital—A form of capital that provides supportive resources to make a smooth transition for college students to earn a degree (Thayer, 2000).

Chapter II. Literature Review

The purpose of this qualitative multi-case study was to explore the experiences of first-generation college students participating in a nationally certified peer tutoring program. The review of the literature related to this study of first-generation college students and peer tutoring programs consists of the following topics: (a) benefits of an undergraduate degree, (b) community colleges (c) educational preparation, (d) family support, (e) transition to college, (f) social and cultural capital, (g) student development theory, (h) faculty and academic advisement, (i) self-efficacy theory and academic support, (j) vicarious experiences, and (k) peer tutoring programs.

Benefits of an Undergraduate Degree

Investment in higher education will benefit individuals and move economic development forward in the United States (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Goodman (2009) stated, “Education remains a key tool to individual economic success and employment” (p. 14). According to Baum, May, and Payea (2010), when undergraduate students receive their bachelor’s degrees, they will not only earn more per capita income but also will reduce the rates of unemployment and poverty levels. Although the rate of college enrollment has improved, the degree completion rate for the United States is low compared to other countries in the world (Callan, 2008).

According to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the overall national graduation rate for college students who earned a bachelor’s degree is 63.2% (Radford, Berkner, Wheelless, & Shepherd, 2010). While it is important that first-generation college students enter college, it is equally important that they earn a bachelor’s degree. Engle and Tinto (2008) stated, “Simply put, it is in our shared national interest to act now to increase the number of students who not only enter college, but more importantly earn

their degrees particularly baccalaureates” (p. 5). When first-generation college students do achieve their undergraduate diplomas, many other persons in their lives are the beneficiaries as well. The benefits of an undergraduate education are demonstrated when graduates give back to their communities and incorporate their new knowledge and expertise in their fields of expertise (St. John & Parsons, 2004).

Community Colleges

While many high school graduates may choose to enter four-year colleges, others decide to enter two-year community colleges. Of the current U.S. undergraduate students, 45% of first-year students represent community college students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). Typically 40% of community college students are the first in their families to attend college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). Students may choose to further their education at four-year institutions after attending a community college.

Community colleges are a main pipeline for students to enter in a baccalaureate college or university. As Pusser and Levin (2009) mentioned, “Community colleges have served as a gateway to university and four-year college baccalaureate programs to the extent that some state public universities rely upon community colleges for more than 60 percent of their students who complete baccalaureate degrees” (p. 10). According to Carnevale and Rose’s research (2011), college-educated workers with a bachelor’s degree not only demonstrate their skills toward higher pay but also prove to be more valued or respected by their employers.

While enrolling in a college education is beneficial, students who fail to complete their education often do not profit from that endeavor. First-generation college students are more likely to leave before their second year of college and less likely to return to a four-year institution after leaving (Choy, 2001). Folger, Carter, and Chase (2004) surmised that when

first-generation college students do not finish college, “society loses their potential as enthusiastic, professional individuals” (p. 472). Moreover, according to Baum et al. (2010), students who earned a baccalaureate degree, compared to those who earned a high school diploma or a two-year college degree, will earn more per capita. Earning a bachelor’s degree can be vital, not only to society but also to the individual (Baum et al., 2010). As researchers discovered, retaining students in higher education is just as important as obtaining students to enroll. Research also recommended the need to more fully explore the ways to better prepare students for post-secondary educational experiences.

Educational Preparation

Two national surveys conducted by the Maguire Associates, a higher education market research company, compared views from college faculty members about how high school teachers prepared their students for the rigor of college work (Sanoff, 2006). It was reported that 44% of college professors described their students as “not well prepared for the demands of college level writing” (Sanoff, 2006, p. 1). Part of the challenge for first-generation college students may be a lack of adequate preparation for college when compared to their continuing generation college student peers (Warburton et al., 2001). Engle et al. (2006) and Warburton et al. (2001) found that first-generation college students had a difficult time as they transitioned from high school to college because they were less likely to complete a challenging high school curriculum and, as a result, were less academically prepared when beginning their college coursework. College students who did not complete a higher mathematics course, such as pre-calculus or calculus, were at greater risk of not graduating with an undergraduate degree (Chen, 2005). Ishanti (2006) concluded that first-generation college students who completed a

competitive high school curriculum were more likely to graduate with a bachelor's degree than students who did not.

Engle and Tinto (2008) referred to data from the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Study (BPS) and found that low-income, first-generation college students were almost four times more likely to drop out after their first year at college compared to continuing college generation students. At public, four-year institutions, members of this student population were nearly three times likely to leave after their first year compared to their continuing college generation students. At private not-for-profit, four-year institutions, the percentage for this student population who started and were more likely to leave after the first year compared to their continuing college generation students were more than five times (Engle & Tinto, 2008). While entering and retaining students from the educators' and administrators' positions are important, they are not the only keys to students' educational success.

Family Support

While parents of first-generation college students may be supportive of their children's decision to attend college (Dennis et al., 2005), it may be more difficult for these parents to understand the process of enrolling and applying for financial aid (Choy, 2001). Choy (2001) also found that students from low-income families, with parents who had little college experience, were less able to rely on their parents to provide them with assistance about the college process, such as how to apply for college or pay for a college education. The parents of this population, who never attended or graduated from college, may be unable to share or suggest specific advice about college after enrollment. Dennis et al. (2005) conducted a longitudinal study of first-generation college students based on their needs and the support that they received from their peers to adjust to college. Dennis et al. (2005) found in their results that, "First-