

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

Let's Help First-Generation Students Succeed



Jason Greenberg for The Chronicle

By Joseph Sanacore and Anthony Palumbo | MAY 18, 2015

We advocate for first-generation college students because we once were first-generation college students. Our parents' academic careers ended at eighth grade. To put ourselves through college, we worked jobs requiring hard, physical labor. We take it personally when low-income students, often the first in their families to attend college, are lured with loans, then left to flounder.

Many colleges have four-year graduation rates below 30 percent, some below 10 percent. Yet most of their students have loans that must be paid, whether or not the students graduate. We advocate that students avoid colleges with four- and six-year graduation rates

significantly below their state's average. Low graduation rates suggest that administrators take students' money aware and unashamed that most of the students will not graduate and may not even complete their first year.

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

Check out the rest of our special report on efforts to help this growing group of students succeed.

Those schools are a discredit to academe, undermine the aspirations of students and their hard-working parents, and financially cripple them. According to a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, student debt rose 12 percent in 2013, to \$1.08 trillion. Worse, that increase is being driven mostly by Americans with poor credit and few resources. Not only is that debt a financial time bomb; it's also an abuse of public trust.

It doesn't have to be this way. Colleges could use tuition dollars to provide services with strong potential for increasing academic success and graduation rates. The federal government and a number of states have been changing their financial-aid formulas to include timely progress toward graduation. For example, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education approved a new aid policy that increases financial awards when students meet certain credit milestones and decreases awards to institutions when their students do not graduate in a timely manner.

As Joe Garcia, Colorado's lieutenant governor and executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, put it, "We're saying, Schools, it's your responsibility to admit these students and provide services to help them get through."

First-generation students often grapple not only with self-doubt and a lack of academic advice from family members, but also with work-related responsibilities, inadequate writing skills, and other personal and intellectual challenges. Although those students' academic potential is comparable to their more-accomplished peers, that potential needs to be nurtured through a consistent and cohesive support system.

To help those students stay in school, administrators and faculty members need to work collaboratively in developing a comprehensive retention plan that is well matched with students' learning interests, strengths, and needs. While not a panacea, the following considerations can help:

Emphasize to students how crucial it is to attend class.

- Use the backgrounds of incoming students to support their "cultural capital." Involve them in setting goals that are interesting, meaningful, and culturally relevant to them, and that translate into their personal and professional lives. Professors and advisers should encourage students to engage in cultural activities that connect them to one another and to their college. Joining clubs and attending concerts and other events can build cultural capital. Those activities also support a sense of belonging, which is vitally important for first-generation students to stay in college and graduate.
- Guide students to register for courses that reflect a balance of their abilities. For example, students with verbal weaknesses should not enroll in English, Western civilization, philosophy, and a new language all at once. Instead, their chances of success are increased when their course schedule reflects a balance of English with science, technology, art, music, or other less verbally dominant courses. Those students should also register for no more than four courses each semester and should take two courses in the summer session.
- Organize a panel of juniors and seniors from different backgrounds to discuss how they adapted to

college life, including how they pursued resources and people to help guide them in decisions. First-generation students can join the conversation and express their specific challenges in higher education. As reported in a recent study in *Psychological Science*, such low-key intervention has the potential to increase retention rates, helping students academically, emotionally, and socially.

- Support students' writing efforts by (1) modeling the writing process for them; (2) meeting with them in small, short-term groups to share pertinent feedback; and (3) encouraging them to send email attachments of their first and second drafts, then using the comment software to provide them with constructive feedback. Such support tends to improve writing, grades, and students' academic self-esteem.
- Nurture students' well-being. In a 2014 report from Gallup, in partnership with Purdue University and the Lumina Foundation, college graduates were found to be more likely to be engaged at work if they'd had professors who fostered their excitement in learning, supported their efforts in an internship-type program, encouraged them to pursue their passions, and demonstrably cared about them.
- Require rigorous courses with clear goals that offer students readily accessible and adequate support.
- Emphasize to students how crucial it is to attend class. In "The Empty Desk: Caring Strategies to Talk to Students About Their Attendance," Rose Russo-Gleicher, a social worker and adjunct professor of human services, suggests dealing with student absences directly — speaking with students privately about their attendance problems and demonstrating empathy by listening attentively and supporting their efforts to improve.
- Carefully monitor students' engagement and progress, and intervene quickly and decisively if things aren't going well.

Male students are particularly at risk of not completing their college education. A recent report from the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, "*Projections of Education Statistics to 2014*," described the growing gender gap in college enrollment and completion.

Administrators, faculty, and staff should never underestimate what a brave and intimidating leap first-generation college students are taking. Helping them succeed is a fundamental responsibility, and requires as much dedication and planning on our part as students are pledging on theirs.

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This article is part of:

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