



Policies and practices to help first-generation college students succeed (opinion)

Submitted by Alecea Standlee on April 11, 2019 - 3:00am
First-Generation Students: Needs and Benefits

No one expected me to attend college. As a first-generation college student, I was from a desperately poor family in a rural community. I was one of only six members of my entire high school graduating class to attend a higher education institution. Today, I am a professor at a private liberal arts college and a career academic. While I am proud of my achievements, my ability to be here is the result of a lifetime of support from my family and community, as well as my academic institutions.

First-generation students today are faced with academic, financial and cultural challenges, even as a college education is ever more necessary for career achievement. College leaders and faculty members, including those who are first generation themselves, play a role in the development of policies and practices to help them deal with those challenges. I recommend that they consider the following:

Provide appropriate supports. Financial support is necessary for many students, and first-generation students rely heavily on grants and loans. But many first-generation students must also financially support parents, siblings and/or children. Providing access to basic health care and information and resources for self-care is important. Offering campus work opportunities, food pantries and free toiletries can also be essential to success. Encouraging the use of low-cost textbooks and providing a credit account at the bookstore can help, as well. And establishing a career clothing bank for interviews and training students on what to expect at a job interview can help them move from college to work after graduation.

Additionally, first-generation college students can't rely on advice from college-educated parents about navigating college life. They are usually not familiar with the details of college life, academic resources and social expectations, so they can need guidance. For instance, a freshman student I knew did not understand why his professors were

not in their classrooms all day, as in high school. In my own case, I didn't realize that it was possible to withdraw from a class for health reasons rather than fail. Building a mandatory introduction to college life or first-year experience element into the curriculum is very helpful to first-generation students -- and, in fact, good for all students.

Some needs are academic: first-generation students may require additional support to develop their writing and critical thinking skills. Institutions can provide such support in the form of writing centers and tutoring centers, but it is essential to build those into the core curriculum to avoid stigmatizing first-gen students alone.

In addition, faculty members and advisers can play a huge role in the lives of all college students. For first-generation students, they may be the most significant connections that they will make when it comes to academic success.

Be transparent in the classroom. Encourage students to develop and practice understanding written and verbal instructions. Don't assume your students know that all assignments must be typed, for example. Be clear and explicit. Express classroom norms. Model classroom discussions and provide specific -- and obvious -- details on assignments and other activities.

Teach study skills. Consider incorporating a study-skills assignment in your introductory classes or make sure you have a handy list of resources. Identify students who may lack preparation and provide resources. Referrals to college writing centers or citation websites are helpful. Turn your first-day icebreaker into an activity on time management.

Organize students into groups. Consider putting students in study groups or incorporating group assignments in your classes, as first-generation students may struggle to make friends and to connect with others. Be thoughtful, however, about students who may have limited time and money for activities outside class as you design your semester. It's sometimes best to organize group work in class.

Develop personal relationships. To the degree you are comfortable, talk with first-generation students individually and encourage them to ask questions. Discuss not only the material but the culture and structure of higher education. Some students may lack family and community support. Others may struggle just to get through the day.

Engage parents. Students can often feel disconnected from their families and

communities and also experience anxiety, embarrassment, shame and anger. Classroom connection is limited, but if appropriate, consider including an activity that encourages students to engage with parents or other people in their lives. I have used a budget activity, a biography activity and an intergenerational pop culture activity successfully.

Facilitate connections. Encourage students to connect with campus activities and groups. Alert them occasionally in class to events on the campus. If relevant to the course, offer them extra credit for attending.

Fight invisibility. If it's applicable to your course, consider including first-generation experiences in the material. Be aware that some first-generation students will be rightfully proud of their achievements. Invite a first-generation colleague to guest lecture, and ask them to talk about their own status before diving into class material.

Keep an open mind. First-generation students may have a wide variety of skill levels, but they are also likely to have some unusual experiences or insights that might be valuable in your classroom. Encourage them to contribute.

For first-generation students, going to college requires stepping outside their comfort zone. That can instill feelings of disconnection and even guilt in relation to family members and friends. It also requires leaving one set of social expectations behind and learning a new and at times frightening set of attitudes and behaviors. And all this can occur while trying to keep up with college-level work.

Going to college also means learning to walk between worlds, and for some, myself included, never quite fitting in to either. All that said, however, support from institutions and faculty members can have a real and positive impact on first-generation students.

Alecea Standlee is a first-generation college student, assistant professor of sociology at Gettysburg College and editor of On the Borders of the Academy: Challenges and Strategies for First-Generation Graduate Students and Faculty ^[1], published by Syracuse University Press.

Section:

Diversity ^[2]

Image Source:

Istockphoto.com/Dmephotography

Is this diversity newsletter?:

Disable left side advertisement?:

Is this Career Advice newsletter?:

Trending:

Source URL: <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/04/11/policies-and-practices-help-first-generation-college-students-succeed-opinion>

Links

[1] <http://syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu/fall-2018/on-the-borders.html>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity>