

Uncovering the Role of Cultural Capital in College Success

Introduction

First-generation college students are almost three times as likely to withdraw from school within three years of admission as students with parents who have a bachelor's degree. Despite this, first-generation students make up about one-third of students enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics). To encourage the creation of fair and equal college experiences, there is a need to understand what first-generation college students require to be successful. Prior research has examined the general barriers to success that college students experience (e.g., Hansell, 1982; Sgan-Choen & Lowental, 1988), but we know very little about how parental expectations and prior academic experience shape student success.

Methods and Results

To investigate the role of parental expectations and academic experience, five first-year college-age women from a liberal arts institution in the northeast United States were interviewed. Through the creation of concept maps and memos, findings were examined, results were compared, and common themes were discovered associated with parental expectations and familiarity with the academic and social aspects of college life.

Analysis of narratives of students whose parents are college-educated revealed a specific collection of behaviors that were employed by these students to succeed; while examination of narratives of first-generation college students uncovered the challenges that these students encountered navigating college without the cultural capital that is afforded by parents who have college educations. Specifically, students who had college-educated parents were encouraged to attend college. Many parents pushed their children to pursue paths similar to theirs, and even pressured children to the extent that attending college was presented as the only reasonable option after high school graduation. All students were pressured by their parents to prioritize location and distance of colleges, but for different reasons. Many parents identified acceptable distances for where their children could travel for their college educations based on family needs and previous experience. Parents who attended college saw value in attending college close to home for financial reasons, while parents who did not attend college encouraged their children to attend colleges close to home so that they could continue working and helping in the family home. Parents who attended college expected their children to contact them regularly, monitoring their children's new-found independence. Parents who did not attend college did not emphasize the need for frequent contact with their children and seemed naïve about college students engaging in under-age drinking or skipping classes. Lastly, parents who attended college strongly encouraged their children to reach out and create relationships with their professors. In contrast, students whose parents did not attend college were not aware of the value of networking with professors and alumni.

Conclusion

These preliminary data suggest that the first-year college students' experiences are shaped by their parents' experience and familiarity with the academic and social aspects of college life. The findings from this study point to the need for counseling directed toward first-year students about behaviors that can foster achievement and confidence in college, and accessibility to skill toolkits that will equip first-generation college students to thrive in an environment with which their parents have had limited exposure. Additionally, this research could be used to create informational material for the

parents of first-year college students. Through this study, attention was brought to the important role of cultural capital in parental expectations which foster constructive behaviors in first-year college women.

Selected References

Hansell, S. 1982. "Student, Parent, and School Effects on the Stress of College Application." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 23, 1, 38-51.

National Center for Education Statistics, First-Generation Students, "College Access, Persistence, and Post Bachelor's Outcomes," <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2018421>.

Sgan-Choen, H.D., & Lowental, U. 1988. "Sources of Stress among Israeli Dental Students." *The Journal of American College Health Association*, 36, 6, 317-321.