

Struggles Faced by First Generation Latinx Students at Purchase College

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Abstract

First generation college students have been known to delay college entry, need remedial coursework, and drop out of college. Fifty-six percent of college students in the United States are first generation (firstgen). This research includes the struggles and difficulties first generation latinx college students encounter. Milagros Pena, president of Purchase College and students from Purchase College were interviewed to get personal experiences. Purchase is known to be a diverse institution. It currently has an enrollment of 25.8% of Hispanic/Latinx students, the majority of them first generation college students. The purpose of this study is to understand how first generation students attending Purchase College recognize that their struggles and experience impact their academic success, social life, self-esteem, financial stability, and their job search. Throughout my research and interviews it is clear that first generation college students are struggling with lack of college readiness, low financial stability, trying to fit in a new atmosphere, lack of family support, and experiencing low-self-esteem and/or self-doubt. Accordingly, Purchase college, and colleges in general, should make a change and include personalized support programs for first generation college students. These colleges should provide financial, emotional, and physical support, and have a job coordinator that helps these students find adequate jobs in their area of study. These things need to be done in order for this trend to stop. If we do not stop it soon enough, more and more first generation college students will continue to experience these struggles. There is no need for college students to experience more challenges than the ones they already have to face. All these struggles and difficulties will lead to academic failure and unfortunately also leads students to drop out of college.

Struggles Faced by First Generation Latinx Students at Purchase College

Latinx students have one of the lowest rates of enrollment in higher education, but “Latinx students in the United States currently make up 20% of the student population, and it is thought to increasingly grow throughout the years” (Gandara 8). This is the highest rate of Latinx students ever enrolled in college, but at Purchase College we currently have an enrollment of 25.8% of Hispanic/Latinx students, which is the second highest percent rate (purchase). Being a senior at Purchase has made me realize that hard work pays off. As a first generation Latina student, I frequently reflect on all the obstacles I have encountered throughout my college experience, and I know I am not the only one facing these struggles. It is incredibly difficult being a first generation Latinx student. To better help these students it is essential that we thoroughly examine and understand the numerous challenges of first generation Latinx students at Purchase College, from the beginning of their college life until graduation, and it is imperative that we focus on the ways that Purchase can make changes that would benefit its first generation students (FGCS) who are struggling in school. Purchase needs to have personalized advising and/or counseling for FGCS. Purchase needs to help these students with the college process, starting with support groups, help with financial aid, tutoring, and job placement. If nothing is done, these students and incoming students will continue having these issues, schools need to understand that this will only benefit everyone. If the necessary changes are made colleges and their students will succeed and accomplish their goals. Colleges shouldn't make the college process more difficult they need to promote student's well-being and provide the students with the necessary help they need. FGCS need to join forces and demand the changes and help they need at their schools.

Background

FGCS have been known to delay college entry, need remedial coursework, and drop out of college; this is all proven through previous research. As a FGCS myself, I know that there are many more struggles and difficulties than mentioned above. I personally have struggled since the beginning of my college experience. I didn't have any prior knowledge and/or any guidance throughout my college process; I didn't know what Financial Aid, scholarships, grants, housing, books, etc. were. I didn't know where to begin, and this is very common with FGCS.

Unfortunately, nothing has been done to reverse these trends. FGCS need mentoring, tutoring, and support throughout their college life. The purpose of my study is to understand how FGCS attending Purchase College recognize that they are struggling and how these struggles and difficulties impact their academic success, social life, self-esteem, financial stability, and their job placement. This research also includes interviews with four female Purchase College students, who were asked the following questions: 1. Why do you think it's important for first-generation students to attend college?, 2. As a first-generation student what do you think you typically struggle with?, 3. In your experience, what are some key pieces of information that first-generation students lack or learn later?, 4. What were the factors that lead you to pursue an education even though no one in your family has?, 5. Where does your value for education come from?, 6. As a present first generation college student what advice would you give incoming first generation college students? Why? and lastly 7. What do you think Purchase College should do for their first generation student population, and what do you think will be beneficial to you ? All of my interviewees had different answers, but they also had a lot in common. It is clear that there needs to be a change. FGCS, including myself, are in desperate need for a more

personalized group of mentors/advisors, tutoring, job coordinators, financial help, and physical and emotional support.

How bad is it?

In the United States FGCS makeup 56% of the student population (firstgen). This is a huge number, which means that most of these students are encountering one or more of the difficulties mentioned above. The extent of these struggles are that FGCS face financial challenges, lack support groups, and experience physical and mental anxiety. FGCS experience the same challenges as non-first-generation students (NFGCS), but they also face their own unique stressors such as a lack of academic preparation, absence of support from family and friends, and difficult cultural transitions. A combination of these factors may put them at higher risk for mental health problems, lower retention rates, and lower graduation rates (House, 157).

The current research has made us aware that the most common struggles FGCS encounter are the following: college readiness, financial challenges, lack of self-esteem, and family support. These issues are very common and affect students in many ways. We must solve these issues immediately to help prevent future students from experiencing these same struggles. College readiness is a very important factor but unfortunately many FGCS lack it. College readiness means that students are prepared for the college experience, know what to expect in college, and know what they need to do or where to go when they need help. FGCS often aren't college ready because they do not have anyone at home or in school to help and guide them through the college process. FGCS also lack college readiness because their parents aren't aware and don't have any prior knowledge of what the college process is. Therefore, these students come into college not knowing what to expect from the experience. This is very bad, because students do not even know what classes to take, how to make their schedule, how to apply for

financial aid, grants, or loans. If students take courses that they don't need, they are just wasting their time and money, and all just because they weren't aware of what courses they needed. This may delay their degree. Cassandra Storli writes, "I remembering asking my professor the first day of school, when do we get our books? He looked at me like I was strange because I was under the assumption that they were given to us. I didn't know that I had to pay for them. I didn't have any money. My mom and dad didn't have any money. That was a traumatic experience" (310). College readiness is something that needs to be taught to students in high school and at home, but some students don't have anyone with experience to guide them at home. Therefore, students shouldn't be afraid to ask for help in high school. It's better to be prepared for college so that no time and money is wasted.

Financial challenges for FGCS are more common than for NFGCS. Many FGCS are minorities and some are even undocumented, therefore do not qualify for any federal aid. Collen O' Neal discusses, "Stress stemmed from a variety of factors including financial stress for all FGCSs and accessing the benefits of DACA for non-citizens. Participant stress came from both individual-level stressors (i.e., balancing work, school, and financial responsibilities) and institutional- and societal-level stressors (i.e., institutional barriers). Struggling to afford a college education is the main reason, many FGCS tend to not attend college, do poorly in school, and delay their college entry because they need to save up money for tuition. Many FGCS have to work multiple jobs to make ends meet, but that just makes school more difficult to deal with, "I had to realize, "[W]orking these two jobs is not benefitting me in the way that it should be. Yeah, it looks good on my résumé, but I'm tired and it's taking a toll on my studies. So, I had to make the decision . . . I'm going to leave [my job] for this semester" (O'Neal, 457).

After graduation from high school many students tend to have a great feeling about themselves, a high self-esteem, and a mindset that they are capable of doing anything and everything they want. Unfortunately, many FGCS are subsequently left very doubtful, questioning “*What’s next?*”. The feeling of not knowing what’s going to happen next leaves students with a very low self-esteem, and low self-esteem leads students to associate themselves with people who share the same cultural background for a large portion of their lives. This makes them feel comfortable, because they do not want to get out of their comfort zone and make new friendships with people who are not just like them. Therefore, there is limited communication and interactions among peers from different backgrounds (Aguilar, 2). FGCS who experience low self-esteem stay away from asking for help, they avoid being noticed, when in reality, what they really need is to ask for help, recognize what they are feeling and why, go for counseling to get listened and have the support that they need to help promote a healthy and high self-esteem.

One of the biggest differences between FGCS vs. NFGCS is family support. NFGCS tend to have all the support that they need from their parents, because their parents know how the college process works, although the family may financially and emotionally support college enrollment, responsibilities at home are still seen as predominant, thus adding to the challenges of the college transition that a Latina first-generation student experiences (Sy & Romero, 2008)” (Storlie, 306). Family pressures leads students to struggle more and have poor academic outcomes. According to First Name Kaeppl, “Another issue that many first-generation students struggle with is the fact that they must straddle two worlds. Because their families don’t understand the higher education system, these students feel like they don’t fully belong at home; however, the opposite is true in that the higher education system doesn’t fit with their personal experiences at home, so first-generation students often feel out of place in both worlds”(2). As a

FGCS myself, I can say that this is 100% true. In my case, my parents are very supportive and try to help me, but one thing they don't understand is that college isn't easy at all. They think that I should be able to go to school, work, and still help around at home. I agree and understand we all need to help around the house, but sometimes it isn't possible. We get extremely stressed with exams, school-work, and our personal lives, and my parents sometimes don't see that. I truly understand their confusion because they've never gone to college, but it would be nice if they could understand me. FGCS ultimately end up feeling out of place both at home and in school. Valerie Lester Leyva explains, "It is so hard to operate in two different worlds. In one of the worlds, you are supposed to be submissive, you are supposed to fulfill your role as a woman. Then you go to a world where you have to say your [professional] opinion" (29).

Additional Challenges

After all the research and interviews that I conducted, I have realized that there are additional issues that FGCS encounter that are less talked about. For example, discrimination, mental health, family pressures, and job placement after college graduation.

Discrimination is a huge challenge for FGCS. According to greatschools.org, "about 50% of all first generation college students in the united states come from low-income families and members of racial or ethnic minority group". Many FGCS are accepted into great schools because of their academic performance, and usually those schools tend to have very wealthy students, sometimes from well-known families. In these situation many people can tell the difference between the wealthy and non-wealthy and this is how discrimination starts.

Discrimination in these cases consists of bullying others because they either aren't academically or economically at the same level. Things such as having a car, the house they live in, the clothes they wear, the friends they associate with, etc. All these little things make students judge and

discriminate other students. Discrimination needs to stop, especially in school environments. Elisa Perez discusses that, “Young Latinos/as are also more likely to experience discrimination both inside and outside of a school setting when compared to their White counterparts; many Latino/a students have either personally experienced or have witnessed someone else experience discrimination. When Latinos/as are faced with discrimination, studies show there is a decrease in their academic motivation and overall educational aspirations (Alfaro, Umaña-Taylor, Gonzales-Backen, Bámaca, & Zeiders, 2009). The low levels of college attainment within the Latino/a community requires a further exploration of available resources to help them succeed academically (Fry, 2002)” (Perez, 2). FGCS already experience more challenges than NFGCS and don’t need additional troubles. Discrimination leads FGCS to feel out of place, to want to drop out, and to feel embarrassed.

Every college student should have a healthy mindset and good mental health, but unfortunately FGCS tend to not have good mental health because of all the struggles and difficulties they encounter. Balancing work and school is sometimes too much pressure for a student to handle, “Latina students, in particular, may be expected to fulfill family role obligations that conflict with the expectations and values of an American education system (Leong, 1993; Tseng, 2004). These roles and responsibilities may include caretaking of dependent family members, emotional and financial support, and spending considerable time with primary and extended family members (Tseng, 2004)” (Storlie, 305). Thinking that one may not achieve the goals they have set for themselves or doubting themselves about not succeeding and leaving their family disappointed all negatively affect one’s mental health. As a FGCS I have experienced these emotions, and the best advice I can give someone is to do your best to avoid thinking all these negative things, and to just look forward and see all the potential you have

within yourself. Be the person you wish to be. This goes hand in hand with family pressure, many FGCS attend college just to please their parents that never had the opportunity to attend college. Students who attend college just to please their parents usually perform poorly and not because they are not smart, but because when you do something that you don't want to you tend to fail. FGCS need to understand that our parents' dream and goals are not ours, we are supposed to have our own hopes and dreams focus on yourself and forget about going to college just to please your parents, but if college is what you choose remember what Collen O' Neal explained, "[I]f you can live 14 years without seeing your family, without going back to your birthplace, having two grandfathers pass away and not being able to give them a final good-bye, I think . . . you can withstand whatever social pressure, whatever financial burden you have in attending college" (460).

Another major problem FGCS encounter is difficulty finding jobs after graduation. Part of the problem is that FGCS have less ties to professionals and individuals in positions to help. These students don't have educated parents that can help them get into a position. FGCS also tend to stay away from internships because they won't be paid, and FGCS need to work to help at home, buy books, and pay for tuition. Cassandra Storlie discusses that "Latinos/as, in general, experience a variety of career development concerns and are subject to multiple challenges and barriers in the world of work. Language barriers, unsafe working conditions, and low paying jobs can challenge career worldviews (Arredondo et al, 2014), in addition to the historically low academic achievement scores among the Latino/a population (Azmitia, Cooper, & Brown, 2009). Although the number of bachelor's degrees granted to Latinos/as was at an all-time high in 2011 (8.5% of all conferred baccalaureate degrees), Latinos/as still trail behind in the total number of 4-year degrees conferred (Fry & Lopez, 2012) and have the lowest percentage of

attainment of all U.S. ethnic groups (Reyes & Nora, 2012), justifying a need for career development services now more than ever” (305). The sad truth is that low-income FGCS students are looking for financial stability and therefore don’t have the same opportunities as people with resources who have endless opportunities. All the struggles included above whether common or not play a huge role on these individuals, we need to come up with solutions to help these students have a more “normal” life.

Consequences

The issues mentioned above have led FGCS to delay college entry, drop out, take remedial classes, and not take advantage of college resources. Research has shown that students who delay enrollment in college are less likely to graduate and may have their long-term earnings penalized. Two 2005 studies suggested that students who delay enrollment are 64 percent less likely than their "on-time" peers to complete a bachelor's degree and 18 percent less likely to complete any college credential (insidehighered.com).

We need to understand that if something is not done for these students, these issues will continue to arise for incoming FGCS. Family support is the number one change that needs to be done according to Elisa Perez, “...play a fundamental role in the development of most Latino students’ desire to obtain a higher education. Studies show that as students are trying to build capital at school, mothers are also trying to build a network of support that can potentially help them assist their children (26). This change will make FGCS succeed in school and be eager to continue their education. We need to focus on what has been done and how it has improved student success. We need to expand in all possible ways to help FGCS because if nothing is done, these issues will continuously arise.

On the other hand, another consequence FGCS experience is not being able to succeed for themselves. FGCS like I mentioned before attend college because of parents, FGCS go to college sort of like paying their parents back for all the sacrifices they have done for them, “Just seeing how my parents overcame the difficulties of what they were going through, over there in El Salvador, and they decided to just make a move and look for something even better . . . so I think it’s seeing how my family has succeeded in different ways. It makes me want to succeed (Violeta, sophomore, non-citizen)” (O’Neal, 460).

Possible Solutions

It is clear that FGCS need personalized support groups, tutoring/guidance, transparent classrooms, personal relationships, and to be encouraged to keep an open mind. Purchase is a large school, but unfortunately it currently only offers a three day summer program, “Success Fellows”, dedicated to FGCS. Purchase, like many other colleges, needs to develop new and personalized programs for FGCS. In fact, “it would be better if there were more specific help for first-generation students so they can have different avenues of support. I saw how difficult it was to know what to do to go to college and it is necessary that our children have more support in order to know what to do and be able to navigate themselves” (Perez, 46). This just shows how FGCS all over the world need these support systems. Students not only need support at home but in school too, FGCS need personalized tutoring and mentors throughout their college life, this would help FGCS stay on top of their degree program, “If there was only a way to pair up young students with mentors who have gone through the process and are pursuing their dream jobs and careers. But not just any kind of mentor, someone you can relate to! Specifically, someone who maybe also grew up in El Monte and perhaps also a woman” (Perez, 47).

Another way to help promote student success is making sure that parents get involved and educated about the college process, as Amy Baldwin suggest. Baldwin writes, “It’s necessary for us as institutions to engage those parents and families of first-generation students and help them understand the college process, so they can also be supportive in that way” (Kaeppel, 3). Parents need to be supportive of their children regardless is they are doing extremely well or not, “My parents gave me the encouragement to attend college, but I didn’t get much encouragement for the ups and downs” (Leyva, 26). FGCS usually experience pressure because their parents want them to take advantage of the opportunities they didn’t have, that’s why when a FGCS fails or does not meet the parent’s expectations the parents are less supportive. “Research shows there are multiple ways to help Latino/a students succeed academically, but that family is key. For example, P. Sanchez’s (2006) research shows that family plays an important role in the lives of Latino/a students through mentorship and support. Although some Latino/a parents may not have an extensive educational background, parents are the most frequently cited sources of support for students of color. In P. Sanchez’s qualitative study, 41% of Latino students interviewed identified family members as providing support with: classes, going to and finishing school, choosing a major/career, the college application process, motivation toward school, and scholarships and financial aid. The author explained that mentors represent a very important form of capital and serve as a significant source of information regarding a higher education that otherwise would not be available. Some students who listed family members as mentors explained that listening to their parents’ struggles was their motivation for trying to obtain a higher education” (Perez, 14-15)

The following study done by Stephens, explains how this study used to determine how FGCS experience more difficulties, stress, and motivation than NFGCS, “We conducted a series

of 2 (generation status: first generation vs. continuing generation) \times 2 (condition: difference-education vs. control) ANCOVAs with the standard set of covariates to examine participants' perceptions of the tasks as stressful, difficult, and motivating. For the three measures of subjective experience, we found neither a significant main effect of condition, all $ps > .30$, nor a significant Generation Status \times Condition interaction, all $ps > .47$. Although the nonconscious measure of physiological thriving (i.e., anabolic-balance reactivity) showed the predicted pattern, participants' perceptions of their stress did not. This lack of correspondence between nonconscious (e.g., physiological) and perceived (e.g., self-reported) responses is consistent with previous findings (Kirschbaum, Klauer, Filipp, & Hellhammer, 1995; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012; Townsend, Major, Gangi, & Mendes, 2011) and with theories that these two classes of responses may serve different functions or index different

Nearly 2 years after a brief intervention that educated students about how social class can matter in college, we asked whether participants—in particular, those who were first-generation college students—were able to use and benefit from this difference-education framework to cope with stressful college situations. Our results for both behavioral and neuroendocrine measures suggest that the answer to this question is yes. First, we found that, overall, participants in the difference-education condition discussed their backgrounds in a speech more often than participants in the control condition. This outcome suggests that participants retained the difference-education framework and were able to use it to understand how their backgrounds influenced their college experiences. Second, we found that first-generation students in the difference-education condition showed more physiological thriving (i.e., higher anabolic-balance reactivity) than first-generation students in the control condition. This finding suggests that the difference-education framework equipped first-

generation students to experience their working-class backgrounds as a strength and enabled them to thrive while they completed a series of stressful tasks (1563).

There are many ways to go about these issues, but none of them are fairly easy to start. Regardless of how difficult it may be, we need to find ways of making the college process more manageable for FGCS. FGCS already have so much going on, and school isn't supposed to be easy, but it shouldn't make students stressed or experience more than usual self-doubt. Many solutions won't happen overnight nor will they solve all the problems, but there must be some sort of initiative in order for more solutions to arise and help minimize or even eliminate the struggles and difficulties faced by FGCS.

How Will This Change happen?

These changes need to start at our schools and eventually at home also, with the support of school faculty and family these changes can happen. Schools need to find other ways to hear FGCS voices, because many FGCS feel like they don't belong in school, they are more likely than their peers to hold back and not participate in class. Creating opportunities for FGCS to share their voices, such as through individual meetings, papers, or peer discussions is another great way to engage FGCS in the classroom.

The most promising thing I can see is that all FGCS at colleges gather together and want to make a change. FGCS want to speak with the people in power in their schools of making these changes. I interviewed Purchase's President Pena, asking her "...besides Success fellows, is there any other program specialized for first generation students?", President Pena replied by saying "I am not completely familiar with everything that Purchase offers, but looking at first

year programs is something that comes in conversation with the dean and president of student affairs, but I would encourage you and other students to give that feedback to student affairs because likely it's a program that is funded somehow..." . President Pena basically has power at Purchase, but she just told me that FGCS should just speak with the student affairs directors to tell them our needs and see what happens from there. If students are hesitant or shy of speaking up, we will ever see a change. If all the FGCS body came together demanding a change I think that would most definitely give us a better outcome.

These changes will promote students' mental wellbeing, and student success, and would give students the support they need to keep going. Students mental well-being is very important, as it will help students' academic performance to improve, they would feel better about themselves, and have an open and positive mind. When students feel good about themselves and see that their academic performance is what they expected, they have the desire to keep going because everything is going well. When students are feeling low, being pressured, and performing poorly, they want to give up. Colleges need to make sure that their students are all in a good stable place so that they can succeed in their academic performance.

Another important reason why schools must make changes is because some students can influence other students to feel like them, act like them, and think like them. This is scary, because there are students who are performing well, have a great attitude, and have great friendships, but a student who is down, performing poorly, and has a negative attitude can pull the "good" down as well. This is why colleges need to work on changes to help promote healthy and successful student populations. FGCS and colleges need to understand that change will benefit everyone not only those students in need.

Conclusion

First-generation students make up a third of all college students. Yet only 27 percent of this group graduates within four years. FGCS encounter more struggles than NFGCS. FGCS struggle with lack of college readiness, low financial stability, trying to fit in a new atmosphere, struggling with academic courses, lack of family support, and experiencing low-self-esteem and/or self-doubt. “We must find ways to engage first-generation students and encourage them, not push them out of college. Many of them are working hard to be in school even though they’re facing many challenges and they deserve an opportunity to get through it. As teachers and mentors, we need to be attuned to the particular issues that first-generation students face so that we can address them and help these students feel supported and successfully navigate college life” (Kaepfel, 4). Colleges need to promote mental health, support groups, personalized mentoring, tutoring, financial help, and job placement after college graduation. All these things need to be done in order for colleges to see and promote healthy student success. Students also need to come together and make sure that their voices are being heard, so that their college can make the changes necessary to help their FGCS body. Aguilar states, “It might appear terrifying, but keep in mind that the struggles of being a first-generation college student are shared by many. You are never alone in this sense because there will always be others who can share ways they overcame their struggles” (2). Students should also remember not to give up, because we are doing this for ourselves. “No matter how difficult it is, or impossible something may seem, there’s definitely a way out. Because a lot of people, they just keep running into obstacles and . . . say, “Well this can’t be done,” or they just quit. [I]f you do that, you’re never going to get anywhere. You really have to be consistent, be dedicated, and know what you want” (O’Neal, 16). Remember to be true to yourself and to do what makes you happy regardless of what others

think, and don't let small or big obstacles bring you down and want to give up. FGCS must keep their head up to end all the stereotypes that have been said about us, and to lead healthy and successful lives, both in college and beyond.

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