What’s on Our Students’ Minds:  
The First to Go to College  
First Generation Student Achievement & Challenge at UM

For all incoming students, the University is a new and exciting place; young people arrive eager to bask in the Maize and Blue and assume the role of college student. Every incoming first year student also faces many challenges in acclimating to the University environment and culture, from the serious (such as learning how advising works), to the seemingly mundane (like understanding what furnishings to bring to a residence hall.)

For those U-M students who are the “first generation” in their families to attend college, this new and exciting place can also pose some unsettling threats. Taken altogether, their experiences can accumulate to affect their academic performance and even their persistence to graduation.

Compared to U-M students for whom one or more parents attended college, first generation students experience:
- higher anxiety and acculturative stress
- fewer connections on campus
- lower high school grades
- longer length of time to graduation (potentially with higher financial burden), and
- lower rates of retention and graduation.

First generation college students also bring unique strengths and perspectives to the University, including resilience, interconnectedness, social confidence and social connection skills, drive, and perseverance – strengths which some may not yet realize can help them in gaining social capital during college. University faculty and staff can help first generation students to develop and explore these traits and improve their college experience and retention and graduation rates (Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, 2005).
**Parent and Student Expectations**

Collier and Morgan propose that “implicit expectations” and “tacit understandings” about the college student’s role are obtained from parents who attended and graduated from college (2008). For instance, some first generation students come to college at a deficit in their understanding that faculty members in varying subject areas will have different expectations for students’ work, resulting in confusion and underperformance (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Their conversations around the dinner table likely did not include “What are elective credits?” and “When can one use the university health center?” Compared to peers whose parents attended and graduated from college, first generation students are more likely to be from families of lower socio-economic status, ethnic minority backgrounds, and have parents with fewer expectations for their educational or career attainment (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

**A New Culture**

According to researchers, “cultural capital” is one half of the recipe to success at college (Collier & Morgan, 2008). The absence of cultural capital, the learned and tacit understanding of the college student’s role and campus culture, contributes to acculturative stress for first generation students.

*The experiences of domestic first generation students on a college campus are comparable to the immigrant experience.*

Stresses from academic and social changes early in the college experience are likely more significant impediments for first generation students than for their non-first generation peers (Jenkins, Belanger, Connaly, Boals, & Duron, 2013). While most research literature regarding acculturative stress is focused on immigrant experiences, these researchers contend that the experiences of domestic first generation students are comparable to the immigrant experience.
**Smaller Peer Groups**

84% of incoming U-M students in 2007 had at least one parent who attended and graduated from college.

First generation students are not only unfamiliar with campus culture, they are significantly outnumbered (Jenkins et al., 2013). From students’ perspective, membership in this category can be incredibly isolating since up to 4200 students (84 percent) in the incoming 2007 cohort self-reported as having at least one parent who attended and graduated from college. Jenkins and colleagues, among others, proposed that first generation students have more difficulty obtaining social support for this reason.

First generation students also experience more post-traumatic stress symptoms, and have less life satisfaction on campus compared to their non-first generation peers, both measures which may be ameliorated by a strong social support network or exacerbated by the absence of one (Jenkins et al., 2013).

**Values Mismatch**

Promoting independence as a primary value and required aspect of obtaining a college education may alienate those first generation students who were socialized with values of interconnectedness.

Stephens and colleagues propose a cultural mismatch theory in which higher education institutions promote high levels of independence to students, a value which may parallel the mainstream media’s depiction of the “American way of life” but are more common for middle-class, college educated, and white Americans than many others (Stephen et al., 2012). Promoting *independence* as a primary value and required aspect of obtaining a college education may alienate first generation students from their working class families, many of whom were socialized to emphasize a counter value of interconnectedness (Stephens et al., 2012). In fact, their study of administrators and students at top universities around the country found that administrators primarily
espouse independent values for students, while first generation students expressed the need for interdependence (Stephens et al., 2012).

To compound this challenge, the move to a college environment often coincides with a break in the connection with the student’s family and non-college attending peers. At the exact time of acculturative stress and challenge, first generation students may be rejected by their support systems (who can feel abandoned by or cut off from a member of the community who “left”). First generation students may also experience difficulty reaching out to peers who may not understand or appreciate what they are experiencing (Attinasi, 1989).

**Methodology**

Since 1993, U-M Student Life Research has administered the CIRP survey (in connection with the national survey coordinated at the University of California at Los Angeles). During the past 22 years, 95,420 University of Michigan entering students have participated in this survey, with a typical response rate in the past decade of 79%. This information provides a unique window to study trends like what they’ve been doing, how they see themselves, and what they want in their futures. Studying these trends affects how we create meaningful learning experiences for each generation of undergraduate students.

The survey contains questions regarding student demographics, family background, high school experiences, social and political beliefs, and future expectations. The information from these students was matched with information from the U-M Office of the Registrar about the same cohort of students: How many students had graduated as of August 2014, how many semesters they took to graduate, and when students departed the university if they did not graduate.

**Demographics**

First generation students are defined as students whose parents did not attend or did not graduate from college. Collectively, “first generation” students belong in two groups. The first group includes all those whose parents have no college experience whatsoever, (about 325 students or 6.7 percent in this dataset.) The second group includes those whose parents attended college but did not graduate, (up to 340 students or 6.8 percent in this dataset).
High School Academic Achievement

_Students with parents who did not attend college fared consistently lower than their peers in high school academic achievement._

Over 80 percent of U-M students in the incoming 2007 cohort, across all parental education categories, reported maintaining an average high school grade of A- or above.

Yet first generation students fared consistently lower than their peers in high school academic achievement. For instance, at least 18 percent of first gen students reported an average high school grade lower than A-, (almost double the rate of other students). This is a marked discrepancy, and a statistically significant one. Whether or not grade point average is tightly linked to college success is a matter of conjecture; regardless, it can have an impact on a student’s self-confidence and self-efficacy.

Self-Confidence

UM students generally come to college with high previous academic marks; yet grades do not always illuminate how confident students feel about their skills and abilities. We were interested in analyzing not just self-reported grade point averages, but also students’ perception of their academic and other confidence.

_Students whose parents had no college background fared lowest in intellectual confidence and writing ability, and higher social confidence levels than students whose parent graduated from college._
One entering assumption in starting this analysis was that more parental education leads to more confidence. Yet this finding was not the result of the analysis. Instead, findings were mixed. Students whose parents had some college education reported the lowest levels of confidence in math and academic ability. Students whose parents had no college background fared lowest in intellectual confidence and writing ability. Students who had a college graduate as a parent reported the lowest levels of social confidence.

These mixed results point to a key challenge - students may indeed experience the mastery they express in the survey, or conversely they may feel less safe communicating their lack of mastery of key skills. Such expression of a high confidence level may challenge first generation students’ willingness and ability to seek the help they need early in their collegiate careers.

**Graduation: If and When**

*Graduation rates at U-M are high for all groups of students, but the time to degree shortens with parental college experience.*

Almost 76 percent of U-M students in the cohort whose parents completed college completed their own degrees in four years or less. Another 16 percent completed their degrees by spending more than four years at the University. Similarly, for first generation students whose parents have some college experience, about 73 percent
graduated in four years or less, while about 15 percent took more than four years to graduate.

However, first generation students whose parents did not attend any college fare notably worse. Only 67 percent graduate in 4 years or less, and 20 percent are able to finish in more than four years. Irrespective of time to degree, total graduation rates do not differ notably among all three groups. Yet this finding suggests an increased financial burden on first generation students, especially those whose parents have no college background at all, in both additional costs of undergraduate attendance and in the delay of starting post-bachelors degree employment or graduate study.

Table 2: Graduated from UM: If and When

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No college</th>
<th>Some college</th>
<th>College graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No completion</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 4 years</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>15.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 years or less</td>
<td>67.1%</td>
<td>72.9%</td>
<td>75.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Financial Worries

*Varying degrees of financial concerns in the first year (none, some or major) did not seem to affect degree completion rates of first generation students.*

In addition, at a time when the rising price of a college education is a regular national news item, we were interested in analyzing if the incoming 2007 cohort had financial concerns that affected their completion rates. Specifically, we questioned if first generation students cite financial concerns at college entry that corresponded to their ability to reach degree completion. On the contrary, we found that varying degrees of financial concerns in the first year (none, some or major) did not seem to affect completion rates of first generation students in the incoming 2007 cohort.

Most first generation students who did not complete their degrees, (about 75 percent in this sample), reported that they had no or some financial concern when they started
their undergraduate careers at the University. Simply put, while financial concern had some relationship with parental educational status, it did not have a particular pattern with graduation rates or time to completion.

**Departure from the University**

*At least 12.5 percent of first generation students had not graduated after six years.*

Most undergraduate students at U-M graduate; but at least 12.5 percent of first generation students in the 2007 incoming cohort did not. In contrast, only about 8 percent of non-first generation students did not attain a Michigan diploma.

**Table 3: When do nonp graduates leave the university? n=221**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No college</th>
<th>Some college</th>
<th>College graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 1</strong></td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td><strong>52.2%</strong></td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>25.0%</strong></td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>20.0%</strong></td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 4</strong></td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.3%</td>
<td><strong>12.9%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 5</strong></td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td><strong>13.0%</strong></td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Year 6 and beyond</strong></td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
<td><strong>8.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of first generation students who do not graduate leave the university during their first or second year.

The departure pattern for students whose parents have no college background is similar to departure patterns of non-first generation students. However, the departure pattern for students whose parents have some college background is notably different. For students whose parents have some college, surviving the first year is key; over half of those departing did so during year 1. For all other students, departure can continue in substantial numbers throughout the college career. This suggests that a variety of retention strategies are needed throughout the student’s tenure, and that there is no specific pattern that applies to all first generation students, or to all students in general.
Jenkins and others raised considerations for students’ persistence to graduation that are beyond academic achievement or level of involvement on campus (Jenkins et al., 2013). A variety of negative experiences in the first few semesters (such as acculturative stress, alienation, unfamiliarity, fear) without the social capital or knowledge of campus resources that could assist could be among the less obvious reasons that first-generation students at the University do not persist to graduate (Jenkins et al., 2013).

**Implications for Faculty and Staff**

While first-generation students who are admitted to the University may have similar academic preparation to non-first generation students, there are marked differences in their academic, social, and personal experiences on campus.

While first-generation students who are admitted to the University may have similar academic preparation to non-first generation students, there are marked differences in their academic, social, and personal experiences on campus. The quantitative data from the first year and departure show us that in some important ways, first-generation students are at a disadvantage.

**Future Directions for Exploration**

Certainly more research could explore contributing factors. Are first generation students at the University not resonating with the campus climate? Do they perceive themselves to be less intelligent, competent, and capable because they do not immediately know how to do everything a student needs to know? How do we frame help-seeking and support for the transition of first-year students to campus? Are we acknowledging and normalizing that every student will experience college differently and that no one is better or worse than their peers? There is an impressive array of resources on campus - is its utility lost on first generation students who may not have the knowledge or desire to participate?
There are the crucial turning points that occur between enrollment and graduation that we must investigate to understand the experiences of first-generation students on a micro level. How do they make decisions about time management? For instance, do they prioritize academic achievement over personal and social development? Or what support do they have when managing a personal crisis? Are they not seeking help because they don’t know where to go or are they choosing to be silent?

We turn back to Jenkins and colleagues’ proposition that first generation students’ psychological state may be affected if their First Gen experiences are pronounced, eventually affecting their level of life satisfaction in college. This lack of satisfaction could lead to non-completion of their degrees. In the event that they do graduate, these students may not have participated in college experiences as meaningfully as their non-first generation peers. This investigation could highlight students’ decision-making abilities and go beyond just its applicability for first-generation students. How does this affect first-generation students’ use of their education and experiences at the University after graduation?

All students entering the University are admitted because their backgrounds and attributes suggest that they are capable of the rigors of a Michigan education and of contributing to a vibrant and robust campus community. No matter where an educator is on campus, our role is to help all our students, including those who are the first generation in the family to the university environment, to make that connection throughout their careers to graduation.

References


