First Generation Students: Pioneers in the 21st Century

As increasing importance is placed on the bachelor’s degree as the entry ticket into the workforce, students who enter the University of Michigan as the first members of their families to attend college bring the hopes and concerns of their families with them.

In this issue, we will describe who our first generation college students are. We will take a look at their expectations coming into the University and their graduation rates upon departing. This will give insight that will allow us to support their educational successes even more meaningfully, and may advance our work with more traditional students as well.

Vincent Tinto (1988) analyzed students’ tendencies to leave the institution in terms of a series of “rites of passage” in academic and social integration that may be more difficult to bridge for some students than for others. Attinasi’s (1989) “niche” model involved creating a smaller geography around oneself to form a connection to the university. This model has application for the larger university student population, as we try to help students build connections to university programs in many ways.

Clearly, first generation students with no family collegiate history may come into the university setting with less knowledge of the jargon, patterns of expected behavior, and traditions associated with university life than their peers from college graduate families. First generation students nationally are less likely to reach their degree goals even after controlling for “socioeconomic status, age, sex, race, and academic and social integration” (Choy, 2001). At potentially greater risk are those students whose parents have some college experience, but no degree. Having the experience of non graduation in the past may make these students fear full engagement in the university experience, paradoxically creating a greater likelihood for departure without a degree.

Data sources
The University of Michigan Division of Student Affairs annually administers the CIRP entering student survey. Students entering undergraduate programs in 1997 as first time, full time students took this survey during their Orientation programs. The survey examines high school experiences, demographics, college preparation, beliefs, and future expectations. This material was paired with information about whether these students had graduated as of January 2003 (5.5 years after entering the University), how long they took to graduate, and how many have departed the University without graduating.

First generation students defined
We studied two groups of “first generation” University students. The first group is those who reported when they entered the University that neither of their parents had ever attended college; these students are the first generation of college attendees in their family. In 1997, 235 students were in this group. The second group is those who reported that one or both of their parents had attended college, but had not received a degree; these students, upon graduation, will be the first generation of college graduates in their family. In 1997, 390 students identified themselves in this category. We compared these groups to a randomly selected group of 415 students who reported that one or both parents graduated from college. Because most first
generation students at the University come from the state of Michigan, the comparison group was comprised of an equal proportion of Michigan residents. The gender proportion was similar (53.4%-54% of each group being female), giving a solid basis for comparative analysis.

Parents of entering class of 1997

First generation students make up between 4.7% and 12.5% of the 1997 entering class, depending on which group of “first generation” students we examine. In either case, these students started their UM experiences very outnumbered. In what meaningful ways might these students differ from the majority of students whose parents had college degrees?

Are there differences in academic preparation for first generation students?

First generation students in 1997 arrived with similar or better high school grades when compared to students from college graduate parents.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No college</th>
<th>Some college</th>
<th>College graduates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A+ or A</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
<td>41.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>33.2%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than A-</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
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While UM students at large are strong academically, as we see, students whose parents had no previous college had attained “A+” or “A” high school grade averages in greater numbers than any other group. By contrast, students whose parents had some college experience reported lower grades than students in the other groups. This may suggest that first generation students have demonstrated highly motivated behavior in academic endeavors, which may transfer to their college experiences.

First generation students described their actions before college in ways similar to their peers in volunteerism, interaction with teachers outside of class, and tutoring of and studying with other students. Additionally, first generation students demonstrate an important difference from their peers in alcohol use: 46.8% of first generation students reported being non-drinkers, compared to 40.1% of students from college graduate families. These academic and social habits of first generation students would seem to indicate readiness for the challenges of the collegiate atmosphere; these students appear poised for success.

Differences emerged, however, regarding preparation for two critical aspects of the UM experience: exposure to diversity, and technical skills. First generation students reported less frequent interaction with students of other racial and ethnic groups prior to attending UM (63.7% of first generation students reporting frequent interactions, compared to 73.7% of students from college graduate families). First generation students also differed from their peers in terms of frequent use of personal computers (66.2% of first generation students frequently used computers before coming to UM, compared to 82.3% of their peers). As these students started their careers in the diverse and technically-dependent environment of the University of Michigan, one might speculate about the impact of this limited exposure. Already, a portion of the language of university life referenced by Attinasi may not be in place.

Differences in self confidence

The varying levels of confidence that students brought to the university are striking. Despite the fact that high numbers of first generation college students bringing “A+” or “A” grade averages to Michigan, many first generation students do
not rank themselves as highly as other students in a number of intellectual areas, including mathematics, writing, and general academic ability. Self identification as excellent students seems to be more difficult for first generation students with no family college background than for other students. On the other hand, students whose parents have some college background have varying differences in comparison to college graduate families. These differences in confidence exist in spite of the fact that they have demonstrated the habits and intellectual ability necessary to do university level work.

Students ranking themselves in the “highest 10 percent” on confidence factors

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**Departure from the university**

Across the entire University of Michigan entering undergraduate cohort in 1997, only 13.8% left the university without graduating as of January 2003. This number closely parallels the number for students from college graduate families, only 13.7% of whom left the university without graduating. In contrast, a significantly higher 23.8% of students from families with no college left the university during this time, as did 26.2% of students from families with some college experience. Interestingly, while the bulk of departures for students from families with no college was during the first year, the bulk of departures for students with some college experience in their families was later, after two years of college.

There are clear implications from these findings regarding assumptions of when students are “safe” in terms of persistence. Rather than thinking about the traditional “honeymoon” period for students (often stated either as the first six weeks of college or from Labor Day until Thanksgiving), the work to retain first generation students may span into the early weeks of the junior year. This is consistent with Attinasi’s assertion that full identification with the university does not take shape until there is immersion in the major (often a task starting in the junior year). Tinto describes the need to integrate with the academic and social sectors of the institution, usually within the first year, to encourage persistence to a degree. This may be especially true for students whose parents have some college experience, but not college degrees.

**When do non-graduates leave the University?**
Differences in graduation rates

As these first generation students go through the University, we find that most graduate, although their graduation may have taken longer than for those with parents who have college degrees. For the whole fall 1997 entering undergraduate cohort, 65.5% graduated in four years; 82.9% had graduated at the end of five years, and 3.3% were still enrolled in classes. For the students from college graduate families in our sample, 62.4% had graduated at the end of four years, and 84.4% had graduated by the end of five years. By contrast for all first generation students, approximately 45% had graduated at the end of four years. At the end of five years, 75.2% of students from no college background had graduated, while 72.8% of students whose families had some college background had graduated.

The fact that the vast majority of University of Michigan students graduate, regardless of background, is a success. However, it is worth considering the implications for students from first generation backgrounds who take longer to graduate, including the higher cost of the UM degree in terms of both tuition and in lost opportunities to start work earlier.

Graduation from UM: If and When

Implications for faculty and staff

Choy (2001) found that first generation students who graduate attain career positions and incomes almost identical to those for graduates from college graduate families. The bachelors degree levels the playing field after college for first generation students and grants these new graduates an array of opportunities. The impact of graduation makes clear our university community’s need to support the graduation of first generation students.

In terms of university services, we clearly need to look at ways to better support first generation students. For some students, support may be as simple as the reminder that they competed successfully for places in a highly selective university. For other students, the extra invitation to participate fully in the university’s offerings may be needed. As faculty and staff who interact regularly with students, there are many opportunities within and outside of the classroom to mentor our first generation students. Such relationships may allow us to encourage student connections to the variety of opportunities and resources within the university, creating meaningful relationships that can help these students withstand the challenges of the collegiate setting.

The University of Michigan plays an important role in the economic, cultural, political, and social life of both our state and our students. Our work to encourage greater student participation in our offerings, resulting in graduation, will only enhance the lives of our students, their contribution to society, and the people they will influence in the future.

References

