Reframing the First Generation College Student Narrative:

TILT Summer Conference 2016
Activity

What is it that we hear that people say about “first generation college students?”
Research on first-generation students as they graduate from high school and enrol in higher education institutions (Ishitani, 2003; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Ting, 1998; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nunez, 2001)
- Tend to be from low income backgrounds
- Tend to be members or racial/ethnic minority groups, particularly Hispanic or African American
- Are more likely to be female than male
- Tend to have lower college entrance examination scores
- Tend to be less academically prepared for college
- Perceive that they are lacking support from their family and friends at home
- At a disadvantage even before starting college.

Chen, 2005; London, 1989, 1992; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004; Richardson and Skinner, 1992; Somers et al., 2004) found:
- They have lower first semester and first-year GPA than their peers
- More likely to drop out during the first year
- More likely to attend classes part-time and work full-time
- More likely to leave without a degree
- Experience more difficulties with their cultural transitions
Moving from a Deficit Approach

- Less focus on the issues of first generation students
- Appreciation of the assets of first generation students
- Institutional action to enhance the collegiate experience for first generation students
Session Outline

- Data Dimensions
- Student Assets
- Faculty Engagement with First Generation Students
- Institutional Culture with First Generation Students
First Generation Students at Colorado State University

Some Data Dimensions
Who are the First Generation Students? Colorado State University

Percentage of New Freshmen Who Are First Generation, Fall 2014

- Minority
- Non-Minority (White, International, NR)
- Minority and Pell Eligible
- Pell Eligible
- Native American
- Hispanic/Latino(a)
- Black
- Asian
- Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Multiracial
- White
- Resident Non- Resident
- (excludes International and NR)

Percentage of Students Who are First Generation: 5% - 75%
Graduation Gap for First Generation Students (6-year graduation)
First generation status is negatively associated with retention and graduation after controlling for other demographics

– 36% lower odds of being retained

– 30% lower odds of graduating in six years
High-scoring college students are more likely to graduate if they’re from well-off families – and the gap is even greater for lower-scoring students.
...Ability turns out to be a relatively minor factor behind this [graduation outcome] divide. If you compare college students with the same standardized-test scores who come from different family backgrounds, you find that their educational outcomes reflect their parents’ income, not their test scores.

New York Times article: “Who Gets to Graduate” by Paul Tough
Examples of Research Insights: Student Assets
Maximizing Assets

Research
- Self-authorship
- Resilience
- Societal contribution

Examples of Research Insights: Student Perceptions
Subjective Student Perceptions that Impact Performance

- Stereotype threat
- Reframing adversity
Students wonder whether “other people will look at them through the lens of a negative stereotype about their group instead of judging them on their merits.” (Stereotype Threat)

Student perceptions of the environment, as well as environmental cues, can either inhibit or buttress students’ optimal performance.

Steele, Spencer, and Aronson (2002)
When students frame and understand their experience as one that others in their shoes have undertaken and mastered, they are better able to solve problems, use resources, and maintain faith in their eventual success.

Stephens, Hemedani, and Destin (2013)
Perceptions of Faculty

Dika, S., (2012)
Lightweis, (2014)
Communication that decodes unspoken academic cultural rules and expresses support enhances the perception of faculty as “resources.”

Dika, S., (2012)
Lightweis, (2014)
Examples of Research Insights: Institutional Culture
Environmental Factors that Impact Student Performance

- Cultural mismatch
- Feedback and messaging
- High impact programs
“Interdependent” messaging, that connects with students’ “interdependent” motives and values and balance the predominant “independent” campus messages, may be more congruent for first generation students, and such congruency is associated with higher performance.

When assured of high instructor standards, student capacity to meet the standards, and availability of relevant resources, students effort and product quality increased.

Yeager, Purdie-Vaughns, Garcia, Apfel, Brzustoski, Master, Hesser, Williams, and Cohen (2013)
Students from underrepresented backgrounds benefit more from “high impact learning activities,” but are less likely to participate.
Educators must “see” first generation college students in new ways. Like gem cutters, educators can participate in the intricate work of mining the value of each student to expose their brilliance; then students may be appreciated in new ways.

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