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Discourse Among First-Generation College Students

Some twenty or thirty years ago, being a first-generation college student was not so uncommon. That generation’s parents did not need a college education to obtain a good paying job and support their family. With the recent shifts in our economy, the workforce has changed and a college education has become ever more important and, to some, even necessary to live a certain standard of life. Due to the awareness of this correlation between education and higher paying careers, in the last twenty or so years more people have made the decision to go to college. The number of first-generation college students has obviously declined due to this social shift. As a result, a discourse community of a group of students who tend to feel lost, confused, and misunderstood, due to their underrepresentation among the majority of their college-going peers, has been formed

Take the Gen-1 Theme House at the University of Cincinnati for example. This program was instituted when a few of the University’s staff became aware of the disheartening statistic that “only 11% of first-gen, Pell-eligible students graduate from college” (Black). The program currently houses about 120 students whose parents either did not attend or did not complete college. Students are also accepted based on their eligibility for the Pell Grant, which means they all come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. These students, who make up such a tiny percentage of the University’s population, can easily feel lost in a space where most of the students around them have more knowledge pertaining to college life than they do. According to the program’s Purpose and Mission, “The Gen-1 Theme House is a UC residence hall that provides students with a safe, orderly and structured environment in which to live, learn and work. The mission of the Gen-1 Theme House is to provide first-year, first-generation students with the support needed to make a successful transition from high school to college.” This program has not only strengthened the awareness of the importance of aiding first-gen students but also heightened awareness on a group that often gets overlooked.

UC Gen-1 Program Coordinator Christina Black states that programs like Gen-1 are needed at universities across the nation. “With the ever-increasing enrollment of first-gen students in college, universities need to respond to this profound need for student support” (Black). This is what the Gen-1 Program has set out to do – to support. When asked what is one of the most helpful aspects of Gen-1, UC Sophomore and Gen-1 student Kayla Kendrick states simply, “Cheaper housing”. Housing is actually one of the most important parts of the program. Gen-1 currently occupies two buildings of the Stratford Heights dorm complex on the University’s campus. All of the freshmen that enter the Gen-1 Program are mandated to live in the Gen-1 dorms for two reasons. First, because according to University of Cincinnati Housing, “students residing on campus do better academically and are more likely to graduate.” This concept is on par with Gen-1’s most important goal - to graduate all of its students. Secondly, because living on campus allows the incoming cohort to create bonds and form an academic support group among themselves. The freshmen have study tables every Tuesday and Thursday and often go beyond these two structured days to do their own studying amongst themselves. In regards to what Kendrick stated about the pricing of living on campus with Gen-1, room and board is offered to these students at a decreased rate – up to 50% of housing and 100% of the unlimited meal plan are covered by Program funding. The coordinators are aware that the majority of first-generation students cannot afford to live in an on-campus dorm, especially not the second-most expensive one at the University of Cincinnati, so they provide this financial support to their students. This lower cost housing further deepens the sense of community between these students because they all know that everyone is in a similar financial situation. This commonality makes the students feel more comfortable around each other, which makes the bonds even stronger.

Support of this kind is necessary to the retention of the individuals within this discourse community. First-generation students face a world of problems different than the average second or third generation student. A lot of the times, first-gen students do not come from the ideal background, partially because of their parents’ low-paying jobs. The motivating factors for attending college are, therefore, much different between these populations. In a research study documented in *College Student Journal* called “What Are The Motivational Factors of First-Generation Minority College Students Who Overcome Their Family Histories to Pursue Higher Education”*,* it was evident that these students attend college for a better life than what they experienced growing up. One woman noted, “I saw my only other avenues as babies, welfare and continuing to live in the projects. I wouldn't live the way my mother did, working two jobs. She worked hard in a Laundromat. I knew if I ever wanted to change my life, it would be through education. There was no way I was not going to do this!” (Blackwell). College is viewed as a ticket out of poor circumstances due to the adapted mentality of “I need to be better off than my parents were”.

There is an apparent contrast to the mentality of the third-generation students that were also studied in this research as a control group. These students, on the other hand, had the decision to attend college made for them by their college graduate parents. One of the ladies in this participant group stated that going to college "was expected in our family, it was like an extension of high school, which was common in our family" (Blackwell). This was obviously a mentality that was engrained in the mind of this particular participant from her youth. She automatically had a better chance of getting admitted to college and graduating and earning her degree because she had her parents and grandparents to look up to and to ask questions of regarding college. Kayla Kendrick believes that the Gen-1 Program is helping some first-gen students achieve higher goals when she states that she feels “…like most of the first generation students have the notion that just because my parents didn't go to college, then I don't. Gen-1 breaks that chain.”

Because of first-gen students’ lack of knowledge regarding college they are often unprepared for the college workload and expectations. When Kendrick was asked what is the hardest part about being a first-generation college student she stated, “Besides the finances, the transition. It was a very rough transition from high school to college. I wasn't prepared for college.” This common notion of unpreparedness leads to stereotypes on the behalf of professors and other noted college faculty. Richard Greenwall, a former first-generation student who is now a professor of history and sociology and also the dean of arts and sciences at St. Joseph’s College in New York, states that first-gen students “often appear disrespectful, unfocused, and lazy when they really aren't.” Kendrick also notes, “One of the biggest misconceptions about first-gen students is that we’re all loud, unfortunate, and don’t know how to behave.”

These stereotypes are misconceptions because these students are often dealing with outside situations that a lot of students never have to worry about. For example, a first-gen student may be in a financial dilemma from a lack of monetary support from their family. They often have to work a full-time job, while attending school as a result. Greenwall recalls that he worked around 20-30 hours a week while he was in college. Working this many hours a week can cause a major setback in GPA due to a lack of preparation, as in not completing homework assignments, not studying for quizzes, tests, and exams, and procrastination.

UC Gen-1 Coordinator and former first-gen student, Christina Black, states that she experienced, “…faculty, staff, or students who assumed that everyone in their class, organization, etc. shared the same privileged background. This resulted in me feeling like the odd one out, although I now realize that these actions stemmed from their ignorance as opposed to any ill will on their part.” Ignorance is one of the major issues up against first-generation college students and what causes a lot of the discourse. These misconceptions that have a basis in ignorance can often leave a first-gen student with low self-efficacy resulting in poor academic performance. If someone is not confident in his or her schoolwork he or she is more easily likely to give up. This is reflected in the 11% statistic presented earlier. First-generation college students have a high dropout rate because oftentimes when their work is compared to that of non first-gen students it may not rank up to the same standards and expectations of the professor. When this happens the student may get discouraged and tell themselves that they are not good at this topic and therefore they will stop trying. Again, going back to the financial aspect of collegiate study, when students are their only and ultimate source for money, they oftentimes disregard their academics and focus solely on working to support tuition, books, housing, food, and other countless unexpected fees. Knowing this, the Gen-1 Staff have put a cap on the amount of hours that can be worked by their students. Gen-1 students are not to exceed 20 hours of paid work within a week’s period. Working an excessive amount of hours per week has been proven to deter academic success, so this rule works to fight against that fact.

The Gen-1 Program has been living up to its expectations of pushing students through to graduation with an average retention rate at a minimum of 90% for each cohort, which is higher than the University average annual retention rate. One of the first Gen-1 graduates, N’deye Ba, states “I’ve been able to do things that I never imagined, and I feel that I have really grown into the person that I can be proud of and that my family, especially my dad, can be proud of” because of the Gen-1 Program. The program is not only improving success for these students, but has also begun to spark a sense of pride in being first-gen. When Black was asked whether or not working for Gen-1 has made her look at her former first-gen status differently she claimed, “Yes, it has helped me to see that it is an aspect of identity on par with other things like gender, race, or sexuality. It has also made me realize that we need to come together as a community to support one another--individual interventions will not suffice to close the achievement gap.”

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*The primary focus of my revision was to work on the overall clarity of the essay so that the information provided could be better understood. I also tried to work on the sentence structure so that the essay can flow more easily. After reading the essay back and reading the professor comments, I noticed how confusing the original essay could be to read because of awkward syntax and diction. Starting with my thesis, I revised a lot of the wordy sentences and tried my hardest to begin a lot of the sentences with subjects. I think that my revisions are a major part of the development of the overall essay. The essay, I believe, is now much easier to read. The last thing I would want is to have a good topic with great supporting analysis and have it be overshadowed by poor wording and sentence structure. I now feel much more confident about this piece.*

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