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FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

**Understanding and Improving the Experience
from Recruitment to Commencement**

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First-Generation College Students

**Understanding and Improving
the Experience from Recruitment
to Commencement**

Lee Ward

Michael J. Siegel

Zebulun Davenport

Foreword by John N. Gardner

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*To our families, who have sustained us; to our colleagues,
who have trusted us; to our teachers, who have enlightened
us; to our students, who have inspired us; and to our
mentors, who have strengthened us*

Foreword

I have often reflected to myself, and said aloud to others, that I don't believe in the notion of a “born teacher.” This phrase, of course, is often used to describe the most effective teachers, but its unintended and unfortunate implication is that if you aren't “born” with the gift, well, too bad, you will never quite measure up to the highest-performing teachers. Thank goodness we know that the best teachers are those that have been “made”—they have absorbed knowledge and been taught pedagogies, and then put these into practice to achieve their level of excellence. Personally, I know I am not a born teacher. I am one that was made by my university, the University of South Carolina, for which I will always be thankful. How I wish I had had this book during my most formative stage, when the university was developing me to reach the level of effectiveness as a professor that I ultimately achieved.

I say that I wish I had had this book because when I started teaching my first college course, I hadn't a clue about the concept of the “first-generation student,” let alone the implications of that concept for the students with whom I was about to interact. It was 1967, two years after our great country, thank goodness, opened the floodgates of access to higher education by adopting Title IV of the Higher Education Act, which provided federal financial aid and made their presence in my classroom possible. And my classroom was at a two-year, essentially open-admission, “regional” campus of the University of South Carolina, located in Lancaster. For those readers who are geographically challenged, Lancaster is a small, historically textile-manufacturing-focused, rural community about twenty-five miles south of Charlotte, North Carolina. And all

of my students were either children of textile mill workers or mill workers themselves. I learned during my very first night class that my students did not speak the same English dialect I spoke and that we had come from very different cultures. What I subsequently learned was that, provided with the right structure for learning experiences, these students could and did perform far better than the pejorative stereotypes about them might have led me to expect. Above all, I learned that for those students on whom we had SAT or ACT scores, these instruments did not measure what their college generation status was; they did not measure their courage and motivation to be in college in the first place; and they did not measure my ability to interject myself as a variable into the learning equation, which stacks the deck against many of these first-generation students.

My own culture was that of an affluent suburb in the New York area. My mother had never attended college, and instead had gone to finishing school. My father had attended college, two in fact, but never completed a degree. He honestly confessed to me that he was kicked out of the first college, the Ivy League school Dartmouth, because of poor grades caused by excessive drinking; he had then moved on to a second-tier institution at which he had not completed his degree due to the stock market crash in 1929. When that happened, his father's business was wiped out, leading to his father's death six months later; my father had to drop out of college to support his mother, four years before the adoption of Social Security. When I started my own college teaching, I did not think of myself, however, as a first-generation student. Although neither of my parents had attained a bachelor's degree, they certainly had acquired the cultural capital of college-educated people, which I in turn acquired, thus ensuring that I would not have much ability as a professor to empathize with my own first-

generation students. I needed this book then! Thus, drawing on my own experience, I am arguing for the value of using this new work—especially as part of faculty development with college professors who are or will be teaching first-generation students.

The authors of *First-Generation College Students* are well qualified to write this important book. Two of them I know personally, and the third I know by reputation. Lee Ward has long been a leader in the student affairs profession in creating meaningful professional development institutes for members of his profession and for any faculty converts they can bring along with them—institutes that promote a more holistic view of student learning, growth, and change during the college years. Ward has personally led a variety of programs designed to address the challenges first-year students face, which are necessary even at a highly selective, regional public university. I have great respect for his intellect, practical experience, and compassion for students.

After he finished studying with my friend and colleague George Kuh at Indiana University, Michael J. Siegel was a colleague of mine for three years in a postdoctoral course taken at the Policy Center on the First Year of College. Siegel and I are alike in that he was not prepared at home for his own work with first-generation students. Siegel, whose father was a professor and whose mother was a university president, was, like me, born a child of privilege. He too needed this book. And he has taken corrective action I am pleased to see by collaborating in its publication! Based on my three years of mutual work with Siegel, I have great confidence in any work he produces.

Finally, although I do not know Zebulun Davenport personally, I know of his professional reputation, and I have intimate knowledge that his campus setting, Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis, is one of the most

supportive developmental environments in the country for first-generation students. I have to conclude, then, that this is a dream team for producing this work.

Although I have just argued that this book needs to be considered, digested, and applied by faculty in particular, it was the authors' purpose to achieve a far wider audience. I endorse their aspiration. So many of us who run America's colleges and universities, on both faculties and staffs as well as on boards of trustees, were not ourselves first-generation students. And no matter the types of institutions at which we may find ourselves employed, we all are going to need to better understand and relate to these students: given changing demographics, the shrinking American middle class, and rising rates of childhood poverty, we are going to have more of these students coming to campus, not fewer. Thus, considering the widening gaps between those who teach and administer and those who are our charges, more than ever we need help in understanding first-generation students, their cultures, their needs, and what we can do for them.

I like very much the way the authors develop this work. They begin by introducing us to these students in Chapter One, helping us understand what Alexander Astin originally called their “input” characteristics—what they bring with them from their respective cultures—into the new territory of postsecondary education, which was not designed for them. This introduction is respectful and scholarly, yet practical. We see how we can use this portrait.

The authors then shift the discussion to first-generation students' critical transition into college, the period in which this cohort often experiences many unnecessary casualties, in Chapter Two. Thankfully, our guides to understanding first-generation students provide us with examples of programmatic interventions that we can replicate to engage first-generation students.

Of course, although it is necessary to get these students into college and through the first year, it is not sufficient. We also have to get them through the balance of the undergraduate curriculum, and I appreciate the fact that Chapter Three moves us beyond simply this high-risk initial entry. Readers will also find here examples of institutional support for students that are associated with the holy grail of increased rates of retention.

The authors devote all of Chapter Four to helping us understand the interrelated concepts of class, culture, and group identity, a discussion that is also useful for us readers who need to develop an understanding of first-generation students that we did not acquire as part of our own upbringing. In fact, I would recommend that readers turn to Chapter Four as the second chapter they read, before they get into the nuts-and-bolts programmatic illustrations of how to increase the success of first-generation students as presented in Chapters Two and Three.

Readers who, by virtue of their upbringing or because of previous professional development, feel less in need of this primer on first-generation student characteristics, could fast-forward immediately to the two chapters on programmatic interventions (Chapters Two and Three), and then could go on to the last two chapters (Five and Six), which lay out a compelling argument for what might be involved in changing our campus cultures to create what the authors call “an environment for first-generation student success.” Once that argument is established, the authors provide a compelling set of key strategies for achieving this goal.

Although the authors provide one brief section in Chapter One on the voices of first-generation students, I recommend that for readers seeking to gain a better understanding of first-generation students—those who value and respect their dignity, their abilities, and the challenges they face—a

perfect complement to this new work is the important writing of Kathleen Cushman in her two-volume series: *First in the Family: Advice About College from First-Generation Students—Your High School Years*, and *First in the Family: Advice About College from First-Generation Students—Your College Years*.

In writing this book, Ward, Siegel, and Davenport sought to provide a definitive source of information on first-generation students.

They sought to give deserving educators a primer about first-generation students—but this work is far more than a primer. In spite of its brevity, it is really much more of a handbook.

They sought to provide a concise, manageable, lucid summary of the best scholarship, practices, and future-oriented thinking about how to effectively recruit, educate, develop, retain, and ultimately graduate first-generation students.

I believe that they have succeeded in these scholarly aspirations, and that future readers will be indebted to them for providing the intellectually credible and research-based grounding that I did not have when I started my career. It is not too late for me and many other educators who may have been teaching and working with first-generation students whose backgrounds and cultures we did not understand.

John N. Gardner
Brevard, North Carolina
December 2011

Preface

With perhaps the widest array of institutional types of any country, and with one of the highest college participation rates, the American higher education system is challenged with educating the most diverse student population in the world. To be sure, the most significant challenge facing an increasingly globalized American college and university system is ensuring that the faculty and staff who shape and deliver learning opportunities, both in and out of class, are increasingly prepared to meet the needs of all minority and nonminority students. And although the expansion and democratization of American education have been responsible for major strides in providing access and opportunities to students from all backgrounds, large gaps still remain in terms of learning, persistence, and graduation among various student populations. First-generation students represent a common thread cutting across all student cohorts and institutional types, yet they are the one population that remains largely unnoticed and poorly understood despite all of the research on students that has emerged in past decades. They are frequently marginalized on their campuses, treated with benign disregard, and placed at a competitive disadvantage because of their invisibility.

First-generation students represent a significant and growing portion of higher education enrollments, between 22 percent and 47 percent, depending on how they are defined (Choy, 2001). Some institutions, agencies, and scholars define first-generation students as those whose parents did not receive a four-year college degree; others define them as those whose parents did not attend college. In Chapter One we argue that this inconsistency matters much less than whether or not a given institution

responsibly addresses the needs of its first-generation students, however that institution defines them. At the same time, we argue that the definition chosen does matter, and that first-generation students should be defined as those whose parents did not attend college because doing so is consistent with the notion that one's level of intimate knowledge about college is the key factor shaping the first-generation experience. How first-generation status is defined may vary by institution and scholar, but first-generation students defined in any way need our attention. College and university administrators, faculty, student affairs educators, governing boards, and policymakers must better understand the characteristics and needs of first-generation students, as well as appropriate teaching and student development strategies, support services, and student success systems that help these students effectively transition into, through, and out of their chosen institution. As colleges and universities feel pressure to increase access for minority students and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and as calls for educational and fiscal accountability continue, retaining and graduating first-generation students grows more important.

We are indebted to those before us who have recognized that first-generation students are a population worthy of institutional and scholarly attention. Research on first-generation students typically falls into three broad categories, as suggested by Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996). The first category concerns precollege characteristics, student expectations, and college choice; the second category focuses on the transition process between high school and college; and the third category addresses college student experiences and their effect on persistence and educational attainment. Where these three strands of first-generation student research overlap is our opportunity to think comprehensively about

first-generation students and suggest promising courses of future action.

First-generation students enter and proceed through our institutions carrying a weight that most students do not: they are underprepared academically for what the college experience holds, and they lack some of the knowledge, called cultural capital, that most of their peers possess. It is this deficiency that distinguishes first-generation students from other students. The knowledge about college life that non-first-generation students receive is a key factor in their capacity to succeed in higher education; first-generation students, because they lack this knowledge, struggle with institutional expectations and the student role.

We have written this book primarily for higher education administrators, faculty, researchers, and graduate students preparing for careers in higher education administration, teaching, or student affairs so that they can expand their understanding and improve their practice relative to this population. Although many first-generation students initially enroll in community colleges, we address pertinent issues more broadly so that educators at all types of campuses can benefit from our synthesis of more targeted literature. The individual chapters are designed to help you design and implement effective curricula, out-of-class learning experiences, and student support services, as well as develop strategic plans that address issues sure to arise in the future. By summarizing research and describing best practices, we hope to stimulate thinking and conversation on individual campuses and encourage innovation.

Most of us in higher education have worked with first-generation students over the years, in and out of class, knowingly and unknowingly, serendipitously and intentionally, successfully and unsuccessfully. Yet although our work has been guided by general principles of student engagement, learning, and development, there have been

few scholarly, broad descriptions of first-generation students and their experiences in higher education on which we can rely. This book grew out of our desire to have a definitive source of information, a primer on first-generation students. It is, therefore, a summary of the best scholarship, practices, and future-oriented thinking about how to effectively recruit, educate, develop, retain, and graduate first-generation students.

To understand first-generation students, and eventually to describe what institutional support for them might look like, we will consider the transitions they and other college students make: namely, the transition into their institution of choice and the transition through that institution. We agree with Pike and Kuh (2005) and Ward (1998) that success in college depends on students' effectively navigating these transitions (as well as the third transition, the transition out), and that our institutions of higher learning—of any type or size—have an obligation to pay attention to these transitions and change the way first-generation students view and experience college. Among other things, this book does the following:

- Describes briefly the current profile of first-generation students, drawing on relevant data, research, reports, and other demographic studies
- Examines the powerful role parental influence plays in the anticipatory socialization of first-generation students
- Examines student expectations concerning college life and academics
- Highlights programmatic initiatives at college campuses around the country that serve first-generation students and create powerful learning environments for their success
- Discusses the influence of parental involvement on the student experience