



Examining the Relationship Between First-Gen Students' Networks and Their Higher Education Journey

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Abstract

This study seeks to discover the meaningful and impactful high school relationships that first-generation, students of color studying at the University of Florida had while in high school. Personal network maps and student interviews were used to identify the key high school relationships that left a lasting impact on students' post-high school journeys. Results showed five main relationship types were helpful to students: family, teachers, counselors, self-advocacy, and friends. This paper specifically focuses on the positive impact that friendship/peer support had on first-generation students attending the University of Florida while they navigated high school and the college-going process as this was an unanticipated finding that ended up being significant in the data. Peer support and peer mentorship allowed first-generation students to not only gather information and work through the college application process together with their peers, but peers also supported the emotional well-being of the first-generation students during this time. This study can help stakeholders and educators understand the importance of friendship and peer support among first-generation students while they are in high school and the positive impacts it has on improving their college access.

Keywords: college access, college and career readiness, first-generation student, students of color

Introduction

This study highlights the types of high school relationships that first-generation students (FGS) at the University of Florida (UF) felt helped them get into college while they were high schoolers. There is currently a gap in the literature pertaining to the types of relationships that positively impact the FGS experience in high school and furthermore how those relationships and mentorships can impact their college and career readiness.

The barriers to higher education are well documented for FGS (Pascarella et al., 2004). These barriers impact FGS of color even more so because according to OShea (2016), FGS are

more likely to be of ethnic or migrant backgrounds. Chen (2005) also states that Black, Hispanic, and other students of color make up about twice as many first-generation students. It is vital that we learn from students' experiences to figure out how to support future generations. This study examines the relationships that helped prepare high school students for college. Using interviews and personal network mapping, the researcher seeks to uncover the specific relationships that supported FGS of color in applying for and gaining acceptance to the University of Florida. While family, teachers, counselors, and students themselves are all instrumental in creating a pathway to higher education, marginalized students' peer relationships play a surprisingly central role in that process.

The literature portion of this study reviews the current landscape of mentorship and the first-generation experience. The lack of scholarship about peer-to-peer mentorship among FGS is also explored. This paper will analyze not only the relationships that FGS found meaningful and helpful to their journey toward higher education, but why peer mentorship and support was vital to their experience in high school. The methods portion of this study will explain the recruitment process for participants and the data collection methods. Results will showcase the main themes that emerged from the data and will highlight peer-to-peer mentorship in depth. This paper will conclude with why future work is important and needed in the K-12 space as it pertains to the improvement of college access for first generation students.

Literature Review

Barriers into Higher Education for First Generation Students

There are several perceived barriers into higher education for first generation students. Pascarella et al. (2004) found three emerging themes that highlight the barriers that students run into. First, FGS students are not as familiar with the logistical aspects of higher education, such as paying for their education and the application process. Second, transitioning from the K-12 space and entering a new space of higher education was a struggle for FGS and their families to adjust to, and third, FGS students end up leaving their programs earlier than those whose parents have already attended university (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The Role of Mentorship in College and Career Readiness

To help alleviate barriers for FGS, there are many initiatives put in place. One that has proven to be effective is the role of mentorship. In their retrospective study, McClain et al. (2021) found that college students who had a mentor during their youth, before entering college, had higher self-efficacy than those who did not have a mentor. Self-efficacy pertains to the feeling and ability to pursue and attend to certain tasks and the confidence associated with completing those tasks. The majority of existing literature about FGS is about the student experience in college. This paper shifts focus to the FGS experience in high school and examines what types and qualities of mentoring relationships were effective for mitigating these barriers.

Within the limited scholarship that focuses on the effects of mentorship on FGS in high school, much of this work centers around the effectiveness of formal mentorship programs or interventions that work to prepare first generation high schoolers early on. Such work can be seen in Duncheon (2019) where high schools work with outreach programs through grant funding or community-based initiatives. The other group of literature focuses on the mentorship and resources that high school counselors can offer first generation high schoolers, such as Bryant and Nicolas' (2011) work where they recommend programming and outreach specifically targeted toward first-generation youth while they are early on in their K-12 careers. However, there is barely any scholarship that talks about the mentorship that can occur between fellow students in this setting. This paper addresses this gap in the literature by reflecting on peer-to-peer mentorship among FGS and its effectiveness regarding their college and career preparation.

The Importance of Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Among First Generation Students

Much of the literature that discusses the college and career readiness of first-generation high school students is situated on formalized initiatives like outside programming and school counseling. Fruiht and Chan (2018) discuss the need for more research surrounding “naturally occurring mentorship,” or an informal approach to mentorship. Their work proves that the organic, informal mentoring relationships that develop in the lives of first-generation youth have a positive impact on them and can predict the college going outcomes of students (Fruiht and Chan, 2018). Tsui (2007) found that students of color may also benefit more greatly from informal mentoring relationships. Aderholdt et al. (2019), for example, presents a paper that highlights the importance of informal peer mentorship among first-generation undergraduate

students and how they helped each other by exchanging information about academic life, self-care, career advice, etc.

There is also a small amount of literature exploring peer mentorship among FGS at the high school level, as can be seen in Brookover et al. (2021). They focused on the types of relationships that were most supportive in helping FGS in high school feel prepared to attend college. Among their findings was an emphasis of the role of friends, and the motivation and support that FGS felt from their friends (Brookover et al., 2021). This paper dives further into the type of findings that were found and how peer mentorship among FGS of color manifested itself.

Methods

This study uses qualitative data analysis and focuses on capturing stories of participants through personal network maps and semi-structured interviews. This study takes a retrospective approach and examines the relationships that FGS at the University of Florida thought were the most influential and impactful throughout their journey transitioning into higher education.

Participants were found through contacting the first-generation Student Affairs office, or the Machen Florida Opportunity Scholars (MFOS) at the University of Florida. Fourteen first-generation students of color were selected to take part in this study varying in seniority. Five identified as LatinX, eight identified as Asian, and two identified as Black. There were ten female participants and four male participants.

The researcher contacted the MFOS office to send out a recruitment message to current students in the program requesting that students email the researcher if they are interested in participating. The researcher emailed each interested student with an interest form and based on responses, the researcher selected students who identified as POC (people of color) and were open to participating in-person instead of virtually.

Before interviews started, participants had a chance to brainstorm by sketching out their high school personal networks from memory. Participants drew themselves in the center of their maps and drew out those who they believed were influential to their higher education journey while in high school.

During the interview portion, participants first had the chance to go through their networks and share why they selected specific people, how they met, what impact they left on them, etc. Participants were then asked a series of questions to go more in-depth about what was initially described, such as what they felt allowed their relationships to thrive and what types of relationships they wish they could add to their maps if they could go back in time.

Results

After interviews were conducted and transcribed through transcription software, they were analyzed and organized into a series of codes based on the themes that appeared the most often. Themes were organized based on the types of relationships that were mentioned the most often as being helpful when it came to their journey into higher education. These five themes were: family, self-advocacy, school counselors/college counselors, teachers, and friendships. This section will briefly discuss each of these themes before exploring friendships in detail.

Family

Every participant mentioned the impact their family members had on their higher education journey. Parents played a large role when it came to either instilling a sense of a college-going mindset from a young age, being a source of support either emotionally or in the form of finding resources and/or assistance. Many participants had parents who were immigrants and shared the emphasis that their parents placed on getting a better education. For example, one student reported:

“My mother, she's from the Dominican Republic and only got to, I believe, seventh grade. She just never had the chance to pursue education after that. But nonetheless, she always homed in that it's extremely important to get ahead, and that you know, because I'm a US citizen, that it's a very big privilege and that I should take advantage of that privilege. And so she was definitely one of the most vocal people throughout my life even since I can remember as a little girl, you know, go to school, do your what you love, but make it so that in the end, you could enjoy your life and not have to suffer like I did.”

Self-Advocacy

Five out of fourteen participants expressed through their interviews that they were a source of inspiration for themselves, and their drive helped them on their path toward college. Many shared the sentiment that they had to figure out on their own how to do things on their own such as completing college applications and filling out the FAFSA for financial aid. As one student put it:

“So for them (their parents) you know, the whole reason the kids are here is like education, better life, the whole dream. They also don't speak English, so it was definitely hard for them to know how college works and how FAFSA works and all of that stuff. So that was essentially all me...”

This is a common sentiment shared among first generation students. In Brookover et al.'s work (2021), one of the findings when interviewing college-bound FGS was that many of these students had self-agency and ownership of the process of preparing and applying for college.

School and College Counselors

Eleven out of fourteen participants reported the helpfulness of their school counselors, and some had separate college counselors. School counselors were seen as helpful in managing stress, anxiety, and helping students with outside factors that were impeding their school life. School counselors for some participants were helpful in terms of mapping out classes and having check-ins to see if they were on track to graduate. College counselors, compared to regular school counselors, were solely devoted to helping create a timeline for college applications, helping with test prep, and helping with essays.

Teachers

Twelve out of fourteen participants mentioned the positive influence of teachers as mentors and as providing support in their daily lives at school. The teachers mentioned creating a sense of comfort through open dialogue, creating a learning environment that was positive and engaging, and “leaving the door open” outside of class hours. One student shared:

“Yeah, Ms. N served as a mentor. She gave off like that safe space, I would say like that no judgment zone, but then she also gave off the ‘I also know everything you need for school’ type of thing... I think she was also a first-gen student and so we were able to relate a lot...”

Friendship and Informal Peer Mentorship

One of the most surprising themes to emerge from this data was that eleven out of fourteen participants expressed the importance of their (organic) friendships as they navigated high school. This went against initial thinking, but peer support was a large factor that helped participants when it came to their mental health and well-being as well as their academics. Tichavakunda (2019) presents a college readiness framework of tangible and intangible cognitive factors that affect a student's trajectory toward higher education. Cognitive factors include academic content knowledge and skills necessary to transition into college-level coursework, while noncognitive factors include mindsets, behaviors, and motivations to do well in school. The friendships and peer support that participants received while in high school helped satisfy both the cognitive and noncognitive factors that Tichavakunda (2019) mentioned. This theme is explored more closely in the following section through several participant stories and experiences

Exploring Tangible and Non-Tangible Support

Two Heads are Better Than One: Tangible Support in College and Career Readiness

One of the most important ways peer support was felt among participants was through the cognitive factors that Tichavakunda (2019) mentioned in their framework. Cognitive factors such as applying for college, writing essays for college, finding information about financial aid, and homework help.

One participant describes the essence of how they were supported throughout high school by their friends. "I would say that I had pretty strong friendships... we would like always consistently talk, we ate lunch together and I would say we would work on college applications together.... we were always on top of like, oh, okay, what essays do you need for your schools? It got to the point where we would just be talking about what we were thinking about the future, what schools we want to go to and what scholarships we should apply to."

Holland (2017) found similar sentiment in their work in which they retrospectively asked Black college students to name the people in their life who helped them get to college. Holland (2017) found that many Black students were "learning while they climbed," that is, students had

to support each other and rely on each other for information about planning/preparing for college.

I'll be There for You: Non-Tangible Support in College and Career Readiness

As mentioned earlier, there are noncognitive factors, like one's emotional state, that Tichavakunda (2019) references as part of their framework. Participants referenced their friends as being a large source of comfort to them throughout high school.

One participant's support system of internet friends gave her "the serotonin boost to continue school" when they were bullied by classmates. Another did not have anyone to turn to until the 10th grade when they felt lost and without purpose, until they rekindled their friendship with an old friend who became an inspirational mentor to them:

"I think it was like 11th grade that we had lunch together. And that was one of the best times of the day, because we would sit there, and we could talk about anything. And we would like scroll through Instagram and look at memes and it was hilarious. Sometimes we would study... we played basketball together, we would go to the park, so it was a lot of different things that I feel impacted our friendship."

Later, this same participant added, "I would say C too was a mentor. He was like a great person because I feel like he was morally a good person and I think that I have adopted some of the way that he is."

Friends were seen as being a coping mechanism for the stressors of high school. Stress stemmed from challenging classes and preparing for college entrance exams like the SAT. Participants found various ways to relieve that stress by connecting with their peers who were going through the same thing. One participant who participated in the Quest Bridge College Match Program, a program that connects low-income, high achieving students to prestigious institutions, found support for the stress they felt in the Quest Bridge Applicant Facebook Group. "I related to my Quest Bridge friends because like, we were all first-gen, low income trying to get into these really big schools."

Friendships also eased the stress of dealing with school as an FGS when combining intersections of race and ethnicity. For one Black participant, their all-Black friend group was what made their experience so enjoyable and manageable:

“My second high school was more rigorous, So I just sort of had to deal with that and take all AP classes. I just had to deal with going through the motions of that, you know, trying to pass calculus, stuff like, and that wasn't fun. But I was going through it with my friend group. Most of my relationships are due to proximity and to similarity and likeness. That's why most of my friend group is Black. So you know, I could get their humor and stuff like that. Also, we had a lot of fun. We had events, we were in clubs, get together and potlucks and picnics. We had laughs and it was it was amazing.”

For another participant, having peers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds was a form of survival in their International Baccalaureate (IB) program that was majority white:

“So freshman year, I was essentially like very alone, but I remember I was in algebra class and I saw my (now) best friend and I was like, she looks Hispanic! And so I was like, ‘oh my God, here I go’. And then, like we had the same bus. And then from there, from our Spanish class, like we might talk to the other little like LatinX people and then some other minorities in general. And we essentially had like a minorities table at lunch... I think that cultural identity made us all kind of like come together and, like oh, let's stick together type of thing. Like, no one's gonna do that (preparation for college) for us so we had a lot of the same experiences and so I think we definitely helped each other.”

Implications

The importance of the friendship/peer support that FGS receive is highlighted by the stories of the participants in this paper. There is no denying the positive impact that friendships have throughout one's journey in school, whether it is getting a better grade in class, dealing with personal hardships, or deciding what is next after high school. These are all issues that many participants have dealt with, but with friends and peers by their side to make it easier. Educators, administrators, and other stakeholders can influence the experience that FGS have in high school and K-12 in general and must pay attention to the importance of friendship and the community that it creates.

Based on this work, there can be more work done to study how schools can create environments that allow FGS to create and cultivate friendships. This may mean longer lunch times, hang-out areas in schools, or creating class time where students are encouraged to have thoughtful discussion with their peers about their futures, dreams, and goals. It is human nature to seek comfort from friendship and meaningful relationships, so allowing the space in schools to harbor these relationships and to make time for them can potentially be transformative in the way students view and experience their time in school.

Conclusion

This study adds to the limited literature about the types of relationships that are influential in the improvement of college access for first-generation high school students, and more specifically, the impacts of peer support and (naturally occurring) mentorship. The results show the five main types of relationships that FGS believed were the most helpful to their higher education journey, including family, self-advocacy, counselors, teachers, and friends. This paper focuses on the friendships that first generation students had in high school. Friends provided help in tangible ways, such as in classes and with college applications, and provided help in non-tangible ways, such as emotional support through difficult times and acting as a coping mechanism to stress.

This research suggests that peer support and mentorship is crucial to the academic and emotional well-being of first-generation students while they are in high school. This ultimately impacts students' college going trajectories. Understanding this is important, as it is essential to allow first generation students to cultivate more meaningful relationships and have the necessary space to enjoy friendship in school. This helps students in their journey toward higher education.

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