

How First-Generation College Students Find Success: Reflections, Strategies, and Recommendations on What Colleges Can Do to Increase Retention among Low-Income Students

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Abstract

In this student voice essay, I reflect on my experiences thus far as a first-generation college student. I share how the Center for Academic Retention and Engagement (CARE) program at Florida State University has contributed to my success. I then discuss the problems and challenges faced by first-generation low-income college students. Next, I reflect on the mental health struggles I faced, which are common but too often not talked about, and how I stay grounded. I describe the struggles many students face—such as fear of the future—and the significance of having a solid social support network to rely on when college gets difficult. I conclude the essay by identifying strategic changes colleges and universities alike can implement to further support first-generation, low-income students that will ensure long-term retention and success. Lastly, I offer my recommendations to current or future college students, regardless of their backgrounds.

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There is a huge misconception about what society believes a student is and the reality. Today, over 40% of all college students are the first-generation (Startz, 2022). Almost 50% of those first-generation students are classified as low-income. I grew up in a small town with only one high school where most of its students came from low-income households and immigrant parents. College was something that seemed impossible for most of us.

I was one of the lucky ones. I was accepted to Florida State University through the Center for Academic Retention and Engagement (CARE) program which helps give first-generation, low-income students the opportunity and support to be the first in their families to graduate with a bachelor's degree from a 4-year university. The CARE program provides services like financial aid through scholarships, academic support, mentors, financial workshops, wellness workshops, and more. These academic and personal resources, embedded in a support center, can help traditionally underrepresented students not only graduate from college but retain what they are learning.

College success is not solely defined by good grades and an impressive resume. It is more about what each student has overcome to get where they are today and whether they are pursuing a dream that fulfills their life purpose and makes them happy. College is more than just an education; college is a chance to explore options, meet new people, learn about diverse cultures, and find something you love and will be content spending the rest of your life doing. It is about following your passions, trying new things, and finding a path that suits you, not anyone else. Most minority parents expect their children to follow a traditional career path such as being a lawyer, doctor, or engineer. Although these jobs may lead to financial success, a college education provides the opportunity to pursue any career you may desire. You are more likely to be successful doing something you love than doing something that just pays the bills. If there is one thing I have learned, it is that there is a job for anything your heart desires.

Having a good support system is one of the main reasons I have been successful. I always say that if it was not for the CARE program, I probably would not still be in college today. The CARE program has not only allowed me to connect with people who grew up like me, but it specifically hires staff who look like us, understand the struggles we face, and can help ease the transition by providing useful advice through their own firsthand experiences. All students, not just first-generation, need to have a mentor who they can trust. For example, there was a time when I was struggling between taking the rest of the year off to help my grandmother when she fell ill or continuing with my education. I was able to express my concerns with my mentor and they gave me great advice on how I could continue to attend college and still be there for my grandmother despite living six hours away. I am not alone; first-generation

students encounter compounding problems associated with being the first in their family to attend college (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020; Redford & Hoyer, 2017). I discuss some key issues below.

Problems and Challenges Faced by First-Generation College Students

Before discussing how to improve college success for first-generation, low-income students, it is important to understand some of the challenges these students face.

1. Finances is one of the biggest challenges students face when deciding if they can go to college. Money is also one of the main reasons students end up dropping out of college (Writers, n.d.). Most colleges' cost of attendance fails to portray the actual cost of attending school. Even if tuition is covered entirely by financial aid, that still leaves students to pay for their books, school supplies, rent, transportation, food, medicine, medical bills, and more (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). When you come from a low-income family, you cannot ask for help from your parents because you know they are barely getting by and do not have much, if any, money to spare. There have been times when I would split up one meal into three or four smaller meals that I would stretch over several days, so I at least had something in my stomach before attending class or studying, because the rent payment was also due. This is the harsh reality of what some college students face daily.
2. Lack of support from staff that truly understands them is another challenge students face. When you go to a school and all the staff and students do not look like you and do not come from similar backgrounds, it can be very discouraging. Imposter syndrome is much higher and can be much more stressful for first-generation students in comparison to their counterparts. This can lead to poor grades, lack of participation, depression, anxiety, and in some cases, dropping out. One of the biggest struggles I faced, like many others, was I could not see the vision. I did not know anyone who grew up poor, went to college, and graduated. Most of the advisors at my high school, and even at Florida State, had parents who went to college or grew up in a home where they did not have to worry about getting evicted or where their next meal was going to come from. It is much harder for people with a lack of training or experience to understand all the struggles a student may be facing, especially the ones they are too afraid to talk about.
3. Mental health is another struggle I would like to discuss. Mental health is typically not something talked about at home and is rarely dealt with. Growing up in a low-income family, you are more susceptible to childhood trauma, anxiety, PTSD, undiagnosed ADHD, and more. Not only that, but mental health is often not considered a real problem and is usually not covered by

basic medical insurance. Our brain is the most vital organ in our body and should be treated as such. Therapy is expensive, and a lot of people do not have the money to afford to seek counseling regularly. Most college campuses offer mental health counseling at little to no cost, but that is not a long-term form of treatment for low-income students with moderate to severe problems.

Reflections

Students around the country are dropping out of college due to undiagnosed and untreated mental health issues. Failure to treat these mental health problems can lead to suicide, the second leading cause of death in students. Society refuses to believe that mental health issues exist since we typically do not see it until it is too late. Growing up in a Hispanic household, mental health is often shrugged off, and if talked about you were told to just “be happy” or “relax,” as if it was that easy. Breaking that stigma and recognizing that mental health problems are normal is the only way we will ensure that people who need counseling receive the help they need. When universities begin to invest in mental health advocacy, not only do the students benefit, but the university and society benefit as well.

Being vulnerable is tough, especially when you have a lot of pressure on your shoulders and lots of people watching. Self-doubt can also drive a student to believe they are not worthy or capable. One aspect that has continued to hinder my success is self-doubt. Self-doubt does not just mean a lack of confidence; it is questioning your entire life path, your choices, your capabilities, and so much more. When you go to class, you know that most people will never understand how much you had to go through just to be where they so peacefully sit. In severe cases, self-doubt can lead to mental health problems that will probably go untreated. While self-doubt cannot be prevented, practicing well-being, self-care, and finding a support system that cares about your success can help minimize these feelings.

Another thing that has hindered my success is fear of the future and finding a job. It is extremely difficult to find a good-paying job straight out of college, especially as a first-generation student with little to no connections to employers. With student loan payments due after graduation, increasing rent and gas prices, and jobs being scarce, it can be stressful to think about where you will find something that pays enough to cover all the bills. The transition to college from high school was challenging but oddly familiar, like starting a new year at a different school. After graduation, you are on your own with debt that takes years to pay back. Some people, like myself, do not have the luxury of being able to move back home after graduation, which can lead to feelings of anxiety as early as freshman year.

As a first-generation student, it is particularly stressful because you do not know where to begin. This can lead to burnout, a lower GPA, trying to find and balance off-campus jobs to pay bills, and increased anxiety and depression (House et al., 2020; Stebleton et

al., 2014). If you decide to attend graduate school, you must show you can test well, conduct research, and volunteer, all while keeping good grades. This sometimes is not even enough to get in to graduate school. It is incredibly challenging for any student to balance a job in college, be active within the university, volunteer, and maintain good grades. The pressure put on college students is very discouraging, and without a solid support system and healthy habits to help cope with the stress, it can be hard to achieve your dreams.

I am the oldest of three siblings, and we lost our mom to cancer at a very young age. She always told us she could not wait until she could see us walk across the stage to graduate, something my mom always dreamed of doing but could not because she had me. I also have cousins who have never seen anyone in our family graduate from college. As a first-generation student, you realize it is much bigger than you when you make that transition and are the first in your family to attend college. It is about showing the people looking up to you that they can do it too.

In college, the lifelong friends I made have been influential in supporting me. I moved to Tallahassee terrified that I would not have friends who understand me since all I ever knew came from a small town that no one has ever even heard of. When I arrived at FSU, I was immediately greeted by the most amazing people who had no clue what they were doing. We worked together, going through the rigors of college in a desperate effort to find our place and a routine that worked for us. I will never forget when we would stay up all night studying for an exam that was the next day quizzing each other. Having a support system that pushes you to do better and helps you when things get rough is one of the best things to have while in college.

I am a firm believer that everyone I have encountered thus far has played some type of role in my success. The people I consider the most influential throughout my journey derive from one program that I owe everything I know about college to, the CARE program, which focuses on first-generation college student success. If more colleges had a similar program, I have no doubt the graduation and retention rates of first-generation, low-income students would dramatically increase. The CARE program actually cares about their students and goes above and beyond for anyone seeking help. The other people who play a key role in my success most likely do not realize they do.

While there are many things, I believe universities around the country could do to increase retention and overall success rates of their students. Below, I highlight a few steps colleges and universities can implement that I believe can improve the retention of first-generation low-income students.

Suggested Interventions to Support First-Generation Student Retention and Success

First, it is one thing to apply to college and get accepted, and another to make the transition and move away for college. Getting in is the easier part of the process when

you do not have the funds to afford to purchase your school supplies, a new laptop, dorm room essentials, housing costs whether living on or off campus, food, and on top of that, tuition. Therefore, I ask leaders to consider distributing grants to college students classified as low-income *before* the semester starts. This will ensure they at least have the basic supplies they need to perform well in school. By doing this, you can help ease the stress the families go through during a time that is supposed to be exciting, nerve-wracking, and unforgettable.

Another thing colleges and universities can do to increase student success is to hire a diverse teaching staff. There are many benefits to having a diverse teaching staff. First, they will introduce unique styles of teaching that may help improve the overall retention of all students. Professors can then collaborate and learn from each other. Another benefit is they will connect to students who look like them on a deeper, more personal level. It is one thing to discuss diversity and inclusion and another to see it at your school. With diversity and inclusion of everyone regardless of race, gender, or religion being one of postsecondary education's "top priorities," we typically do not see this with faculty and staff. Until schools begin to accept the true value diversity brings, we will never see the full extent it could be. Having someone who looks like you in a classroom does not only provide a sense of comfort, but makes you feel more inclined to pay attention and ask for help.

Colleges should offer free mental health counseling and be more active in listening to the students. This is especially important for first-generation students (House et al., 2020). Not only will free mental health counseling be utilized more often, but it will also help break the stigma and encourage others to seek help. When mental health awareness is prioritized, students stay in school and practice better habits that can then be taught to others. By listening to students, you can better understand their needs and adjust resources and support so they can reach their full potential during these unprecedented times.

Recommendations for College Students

The first piece of advice I would give to any future or current college students is to remember to live. Too often, we get caught up with our day-to-day activities and forget that this is supposed to be the best time of our entire lives. College is the last time for many that we will be surrounded by new people every day. Try to take the time to find your passions, join a club or two, or try an intermural sport. Not only will you meet new people and learn skills that cannot be taught in a classroom, but you will also get to build a support system that pushes you to follow your goals and be there for you when you need it the most.

Also, try not to be so hard on yourself. It is okay if you are not where you thought you would be, as long as you are on a path that makes you happy. When you stop

putting this constant pressure on yourself to be the best, you feel better and produce better results. Nothing in life is perfect and holding ourselves to such ambitious standards will only lead to failure. Remember that failure is not always bad. If you are learning something in the process, then it is worth it.

When things get hard, it is especially important to remember your why. Your why is the reason you are pursuing the path you are. When you start to feel self-doubt and anxiety, the ability to remember why you are here and who you are doing it for can help you feel grounded.

One thing I learned that has been useful is to utilize campus resources. While it may not feel like it, there are lots of people waiting to help you so long as you ask. There are special programs you can join that can help you get internships, research opportunities, and mentors, which can eventually lead to access to more scholarships and connections that can help you secure a job. Most campuses have people devoted to helping you reach your dreams; you just have to take the initiative and seek help. Since I started utilizing my resources, I have had the opportunity to join multiple research projects and volunteer to help students in the community. It even gave me the confidence to start my own program teaching high school students where I provide academic advice, and teach them better study habits, how to create a personal career plan, and how to practice better wellness habits. None of this would have been possible if I did not take the time to read the emails sent out by the university, the flyers posted around campus, and attend meetings held by the university.

The last piece of advice I would argue is the most important: take care of your mental health. When you do not feel well, you cannot perform at your best. Remember that it is okay to seek help; you are not weak, you are in fact strong for overcoming your fears to better yourself. If you neglect your mental health, you will burn out quickly, your grades will suffer, and you will be more likely to drop out. Nothing is wrong with seeking help; mental health is something that everyone deals with, whether they admit it or not. When you take the time to take care of yourself, you are not only bettering yourself, but you are also breaking the stigma and changing the way people think about mental health.

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