

Exploring Intergenerational Influences on First-Generation College Students

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First-generation students are currently underrepresented in higher education and in the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. While extensive research has been conducted on first-generation college students, little is known about how other individuals of the previous generation influence these students' college aspirations, enrollments, choice of major, and educational outcomes. This paper briefly outlines potential research questions and methodologies that would allow for first-generation students to be disaggregated by intergenerational influences, as well as further understandings of these types of students as family structures become increasingly complex. The fields of education, sociology, economics, and demography are offered as potential disciplines from which to study this line of inquiry. Such research is expected to further understandings of first-generation students, as well as create programs and policies that increase college attendance, entrance into STEM fields, and degree attainment through non-traditional avenues for these types of students.

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Introduction

As the United States continues its effort to expand access to and success in postsecondary education, and to prepare more individuals to enter and be prepared to succeed in a highly-skilled workforce, first-generation students represent a population of interest. Research on first-generation students has occurred for both reasons of equity (i.e., opportunities for social mobility) and economics (i.e., workforce considerations).

The connection between social stratification and higher education has been an area of interest for education researchers for some time. Past studies have investigated not only how higher education can perpetuate or disrupt social stratification, but also how college students' choice of major can impact social mobility and occupational status. Opportunities for social mobility are particularly important for first-generation students, as attaining a college degree represents an avenue for increased social mobility as compared to the opportunities that their parents may have had, based on their educational attainment. Entrance into certain STEM fields can represent an even greater opportunity for social mobility, given associated potential salary earnings and occupational status.

A number of recent reports from the public and private sectors have expressed concerns regarding the ability of the U.S. to produce and maintain a highly-skilled and globally competitive workforce. Education, business, and governmental communities have urged for the number of STEM graduates to be increased, including the number of degrees awarded to traditionally underrepresented students such as racial and ethnic minorities and first-generation students. Therefore, increasing access and success of first-generation students is of particular importance in the STEM fields, as participation may lead to social mobility, and an increase in the talent pool of individuals available to enter the STEM workforce.

First-generation Students

First-generation students have traditionally been defined by the educational level achieved by the mother and father of a particular student. Specifically, first generation students' parents are not college educated, which affects their college attendance and educational outcomes. The body of research on first-generation students thus far suggests that these students face a multitude of challenges, which include, but are not limited to pre-college preparation, the process of entering college, and persistence in college. Studies have demonstrated that first-generation students lack college-going knowledge, which includes selecting college-preparatory courses in high school and preparing financially for the cost of college. Due to their parents' knowledge base and often inability to assist their children with applying for college, first-generation students also may experience difficulties in navigating the admissions and financial aid processes. Once in college, year-to-year persistence and academic progress may be difficult due to responsibilities that they may have to their families, which may detract from their overall success in college.

The majority of the existing literature on first-generation college students falls into one of three categories: 1) comparisons to other college students; 2) first generation students' transitions to and through college; and 3) educational outcomes of first generation students, including

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persistence in college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). While the existing literature on first-generation students has served an important purpose by informing programs and policies aimed at improving access to, transitions through, and success in higher education for first-generation students, such recommendations have focused only on the effects of non-college-educated parents on students' higher educational choices, experiences and outcomes.

The Problem

Concentrating on the parents' educational attainment in relation to the child's college enrollment and completion is logical from an economic standpoint, yet by only examining the parents' educational attainment and associated influences on students' college outcomes, the contributions of others in shaping and furthering the student's education are devalued. In addition, survey questions that are based on traditional family structures do not allow for some students' family experiences and influences to be captured. For instance, first-generation students who have a college-educated aunt, godfather, or close family friend, may appear to be lacking valuable resources for college access and success according to traditional survey questions, yet, in reality, have a source of information and support in a different form.

The current working definition of first-generation students is limited in two ways. First, it is based on a traditional family structure, which does not reflect the changing and increasingly complex structure of modern families in the United States. Second, the current definition of first-generation students does not incorporate the many ways in which other individuals from a previous generation can impact a first-generation students' access to and success in college. While the inter-generational transfer of college-going knowledge and information is useful to understand, studies of first-generation students have yet to examine how non-parental inter-generational transfers occur, and how such relationships and influences ultimately impact first-generation students.

Census data from 2009 on family structure and children's living arrangements reflects that of 74,230,000 individuals, 1,538,000 children were living with their grandparents, 780,000 children were living with relatives other than their grandparents, 363,000 students were living with a nonrelative only,¹ and 196,000 students were living with foster parent(s). In addition, 1,578,000 children were living with their mother who was cohabitating with an unmarried partner, and 513,000 children were living with their father who was cohabitating with an unmarried partner. African Americans and Hispanics are overrepresented in non-traditional family structures as compared to the general population. Data from the U.S. Census Bureau provide educational information on parents, but only for the mother and father if the child is living with the mother and/or father. No educational information is obtained for the guardians of students living with grandparents, with relatives other than their grandparents, with nonrelatives, or even with foster parents.

In terms of the intersection between family structure, socioeconomic status, and the importance of college attendance, the statistics are quite shocking: 31 percent of students living with their grandparents are below 100 percent poverty status, while 35 percent are below 100 percent poverty status are living with other relatives (no grandparent). Of children living with non-

¹ Does not include foster parent(s)

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relatives (no foster), 95 percent are living below 100 percent poverty status, and 99 percent of those living with foster parent(s) are below 100 percent poverty status.²

A passage from *Urban High School and the Challenge of Access*, an in-depth qualitative study that follows several high school students in the Los Angeles area, provides an example of non-parental intergenerational influences. Trinity, one of the high schools students featured in the book, describes the way that her aunt—who the authors describe as “an educational benefactor”—has assisted her in preparing for college:

My auntie gives me an allowance to help out for school and some fun. She doesn't have any children so she gives me and my brother money. Sometimes we get a \$100 a month from her. I have used that money to buy SAT prep books and to pay for SATs and UC [University of California] applications and stuff like that
(Tierney & Colyar, 2006, p. 131)

While Trinity's parents are not college-educated, and her aunt's educational attainment status not specified, her aunt has clearly influenced Trinity's ability to pursue college. However, should the definition of first-generation students remain in its current state, and future research is designed with a limited conceptualization, opportunities to develop programs and policies to impact their access to and success in higher education may be overlooked.

Guiding Research Questions and Proposed Methodologies

The question at hand—that of exploring other means of intergenerational transfer of knowledge and influence on the college-going process, college persistence, and educational outcomes on first-generation students—lends itself to interdisciplinary studies conducted between educational researchers, sociologists, economists, and demographers. Each of these disciplines offers a unique set of perspectives, theories, and methodologies to conduct this type of research. The overarching research questions for this line of inquiry are:

1. In what ways do non-parental intergenerational influences impact first-generation students'
 - a. Aspirations for college?
 - b. Access to college?
 - c. Selection of their major?
 - d. Persistence and success in college?
 - e. Experiences in college?
2. Is there a difference between the intergenerational influences of relatives and non-relatives on first-generation students' access to and success in college?
3. What human, social, cultural, and economic capital do non-parental intergenerational contacts have to offer first-generation students? How do these sources of capital support, encourage, inspire, and sustain first-generation students' college aspirations and achievements?
4. Do first-generation students with sources of non-parental intergenerational support have different college experiences and outcomes as compared to first-generation students

² According to the Census Bureau, the poverty threshold in 2009 for a three-person family, with one child under 18 years old, was \$17,285.

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without non-parental intergenerational contacts? As compared to traditional college students?

5. How do parental and non-parental intergenerational influences impact first-generation students' choice of major? Specifically, choice of a STEM major? The decision to enter a STEM graduate program? The STEM workforce?

Exploratory qualitative studies are best suited to understand these types of questions, and to offer a deeper understanding of first-generation college students. Proposed methodologies include interviewing and conducting focus groups of current and future first-generation college students. These data collection methods would likely focus on how members of the students' extended family, and individuals who are unrelated but close members of the family (i.e., informal family members) contribute to and shape the student's college access and success. Survey instruments could be used to investigate the complexities of the modern family, as well as identify formal and informal family members that contribute to intergenerational influences. Sociograms could be used to graphically depict the intergenerational individual and group patterns and networks that influence students' college-going knowledge, access, experiences, and outcomes. These initial data collection efforts would in turn inform the design of larger-scale data sets, and aid in the development of questions that aim to accurately measure the intergenerational networks that influence first-generation students.

Implications for Future Research

This proposed line of inquiry anticipates that not all first-generation students lack information, assistance, and support from individuals from the previous generation. Disaggregating subgroups into further detail has proven to be a valuable exercise for researchers across various academic disciplines, as identifying nuanced differences between groups sharing similar characteristics has advanced the understanding of particular phenomena. For instance, disaggregating the experiences of women in the STEM fields by racial and ethnic group produces a set of unique results that differ from examining women in the STEM fields as a whole. In this regard, exploring first-generation students through non-parental intergenerational influences represents one way to disaggregate the experiences and educational outcomes of a group that is typically underrepresented in the STEM fields.

As research on first-generation students incorporates a more complex understanding of modern family definitions and structures, and how other relatives or individuals closely associated with first-generation students are able to influence their transitions to and through college, targeted programs and policies based on empirical findings may be created. In addition, numerous studies for future research in each discipline suggested are feasible. The results of studies from each discipline and interdisciplinary studies would be used to inform programs and policies, allowing for a "second-generation" of research to be conducted on the impacts of such programs and policies. If pathways and methods of increasing the number of successful first-generation students can be uncovered, not only may opportunities for social mobility be expanded, but the STEM workforce may be strengthened by increasing the pool of highly-skilled workers.

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