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Supporting First-Generation College Students

Introduction

“College graduates without a college-educated parent have lower incomes and less wealth, on average, than those with a parent who has a bachelor’s or higher degree” (Fry, 2021). Nobody on my father’s side of the family has ever been educated past the high school level. My mother, on the other hand, graduated from college and now has her master’s degree. She is the reason why I am not a first-generation college student, and this is the thing that makes me so interested in the group. First I will talk about first-generation college students and their unique contributions to the college community. Then I will explore the challenges that these students face in college and at work. Finally, I will find the recommended supports and the supports available for first-generation college students.

Section 1

First-generation college students in the US

It is important before talking about first-generation college students we understand what the term means. A first-generation college student is a college student who has nobody in their family with a bachelor’s degree or higher (Fry, 2021). Many students in college are the first in

their family to attend college. In the 2015-16 academic year, about 35% of undergraduate college students were first-generation college students (PNPI, 2021).

First-generation college students in RI

College/ University	Percentage/ number of undergraduate students identified as first generation	College website
Rhode Island College (RIC)	46%	https://www.ric.edu/documents/fall-2020-official-enrollment-reportpdf
University of Rhode Island (URI)	33%	https://web.uri.edu/student-affairs/first-generation-students/
Providence College (PC)	500+	https://orientation-transitions-leadership.providence.edu/transitions/pc1g/#:~:text=Did%20you%20know%20there%20are,a%20four%2Dyear%20college%20education
Johnson & Whales University (JWU)	33%	https://www.jwu.edu/news/2022/11/tips-first-gen-students.html
Brown University	15%	https://www.brown.edu/news/2022-09-02/2026-numbers

Bryant University	23%	<a href="https://news.bryant.edu/bryants-incoming-class-2026-breaks-enrollment-records#:~:text=The%20entering%20class%20includes%2023,to%2Dcoast%20and%2020%20countries.">https://news.bryant.edu/bryants-incoming-class-2026-breaks-enrollment-records#:~:text=The%20entering%20class%20includes%2023,to%2Dcoast%20and%2020%20countries.
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First-generation college students at RIC

At Rhode Island College, a public college located in Providence, Rhode Island, there is a high population of first-generation college students who attend. Based on the data collected from FAFSA in 2020, “first generation students account for 46% of undergraduates [at RIC] this fall” (RIC 2020 Fall Enrollment Report). The surprisingly high percentage shows that there are many students who fall into this category at RIC. This also means that supports at RIC need to be able to handle the needs of all of these first-generation students. This group of students adds diversity and contributes positively to the RIC community. First-generation college students come from different backgrounds, many of them from different countries, and it is important to include them and help them succeed. Their experiences and knowledge are not common to many students whose parents have had experience with college. These different backgrounds give new perspectives on campus, which is very important to build a unique, accepting community of students and workers.

Section 2

Challenges for first-generation college students

One challenge that first-generation college students face is understanding and applying financial aid. According to a Student Voice respondent from a public university in California, the whole financial aid process is very unclear. The student claims, ““When I first applied, I was completely in the dark about how to pay, when to pay, what financial aid covered, etc. I had to do days of research and multiple phone calls just to understand the basics, and even then it wasn’t the school that taught me but my distant family”” (Ezarik, 2022). As the student points out, their university did not provide them with the support they needed to understand financial aid.

Another challenge that first-generation students face is being misunderstood by those who are assigned to help them. According to Claude Taylor, the director of academic transition and inclusion at the Center for Student Success at Monmouth University in New Jersey, first-generation students and low-income students are not always the same and do not always face the same problems. Taylor explains, ““At Monmouth, it would be a mistake, for example, to equate first gen and low income... Anecdotally, a large percentage of our first-gen students are working- to middle-class students who are fairly comfortable financially”” (Ezarik, 2022). As Taylor points out, there is a difference between first gen and low income students. When their situations are misunderstood, the people who are meant to help them can not provide the help that they need.

Section 3

Recommended supports for first-generation college students

With the challenges that first-generation college students face, supports are essential to keep them on track for graduation and success.

One support that first-generation college students need is their parents. Linda LeMura, the president of New York's Le Moyne College, believes that parents should be there to help their children or give them the push that they need to succeed in college. LeMura demands, "Parents need to be able to encourage, cajole and offer assistance to their children" (Ezarik, 2022). As LeMura points out, the parents play a crucial role in the success of first-generation college students. Parents being informed and staying on the same page with their children will help them and help keep them on track.

Another support which makes the college experience easier for first-generation college students is personalizing the financial aid process. According to Sarah Whitley, the vice president of the Center for First Generation Student Success at NASPA, there is very little help for financial aid that is aimed for first-generation college students. Whitley states, "I'm not sure how much intentionality is happening in the financial aid space in terms of demystifying the process for first-generation families" (Ezarik, 2022). As Whitley points out, help for the financial aid process should be aimed more towards first-generation college students, since they are the first in their families to attend college and they need the help and clarity more than people who can simply ask their parents or siblings their general questions.

A third resource that helps first-generation college students is their academic advisors. Claude Taylor, the director of academic transition and inclusion at the Center for Student Success at Monmouth University in New Jersey, thinks that it is important that these advisors know and understand their students, in order for them to be able to offer the assistance and support that these students need. Taylor argues, "A lot of folks assume they know what it means to be first gen and operate from the most common perceptions of first gen" (Ezarik, 2022). As Taylor mentions, many academic advisors have heard about first-generation college students and

generalize them. However in reality these students are all very different from one another and need someone who understands that to fully connect with them.

Supports available at RIC and in RI for first-generation college students

It is important for first-generation students at RIC to have their parents involved in their college experience. According to Mady Akkoui, a RIC graduate, parent involvement is important to help their children succeed in college. Akkaoui shares, “My family is very supportive. They want better for me than they had” (Dulude, 2022). As Akkoui points out, support from her family helped her get through college and graduate, and pursue further education.

Conclusion

Summary of first-generation college students and the challenges they face

First-generation college students are crucial to diversify and increase a sense of community on college campuses. They make up a large portion of students at colleges, especially at RIC, and they face unique challenges. Other students who are not first generation have the advantage of knowledgeable family members that can support them- a resource first generation students do not have. The challenges that this familial experience brings tests their perseverance throughout college.

Key supports needed for first-generation college students to be successful

First-generation college students need supports to keep them in the know, and that keep them on track to graduate and succeed. Only 20% of first-generation college students complete their degrees (Rivera, 2022). There needs to be parental involvement in their college experience. They also need help with financial aid, both understanding their options and completing the

process. School resources need to be accessible and helpful, with mindful workers who are patient and are looking to help these students succeed.

Ideas for RIC and RI

Rhode Island and Rhode Island College do a good job supporting first-generation college students, but there is always room for improvement. The advertising and social aspect of support for these students is not always efficient or clear, and this can be improved greatly by media. There should be more social media accounts and flyers around the school and emails sent out to first-generation students, rather than the students having to go digging for information about events that are specifically for them. Although they face many obstacles throughout college, first-generation students still succeed with the help of the supports that are in place for them. These students are impressive and should be very proud when they graduate and move on to careers, so that hopefully they can pass on their knowledge of college to their own children who will not have to face as many barriers as they did.

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