

THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE OF FIRST GENERATION FRESHMEN

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Abstract

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research known about the transition to college of first generation students (FGCs) compared to traditional students. FGCs are students whose parents either did not complete college or did not attend a post-secondary institution at all prior to the student entering college. Many of the studies found were qualitative in nature and examined small populations at different schools. Students who participated in the studies came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, rural, and urban settings and their parents had not completed a college degree program. The themes of the literature are the differences in academic, emotional, and social transitions made by first generation and traditional college freshmen.

Introduction

As the world of education continues to evolve, schools of all levels try to study issues that arise for their students and how they can best help scholars succeed. Transitions are an inevitable part of education; from kindergarten to elementary school onto middle then high school and after graduation into either the workforce or onto a post-secondary education institution. The success or failure of graduating from high school or college has led many researchers to look back at the transitioning four years prior to graduating to see how that shift affects future academic success. There are a variety of colleges, universities, and institutions that students are able to attend for an array of post-secondary degrees and the student demographics of schools are beginning to include a larger amount of First Generation Students (FGCs). FGCs are students whose parents did not complete a degree or attend college at all prior to them entering college. The first semester is about "finding one's niche" (Tinto, 1993 p. 59), and the entire first year of college is vital as many students will leave college during that year (Tinto, 1993). Colleges and universities need to understand how they can best assist FGC's to have an efficacious transition and thus a successful college career and that is the motive of this literature review.

Methods

For this literature review, online databases were the main sources of information. The online databases searched were: Academic Search Premier, ERIC, PSYCinfo, and Education Source. In these databases the term *first generation* was paired with the following terms; college transition, transition*, college adjustment, college success, college orientation, (university AND transition), (college AND transition). Many of the articles found were about the transition of specific minorities, different aspects of transition to college in general, not in relation to FGCs, or they discussed aspects of a FGCs college experience that did not pertain to their transition to college and were excluded. Other articles excluded focused on transition to graduate school and review of programs rather than research and data. Articles that assessed programs were reports on

specific programs at specific colleges and excluded. The focus of this literature review was to gather and review all peer-reviewed, factual articles and not opinions or dissertations.

Results

Out of 1093 hits only 10 articles were applicable and the other sources, four articles and one book, came as a result of ancestral searches of these articles. There was an increase of articles published on this topic between 2005 and 2009 with 43% of the articles published during these four years (see Table 1). Six of the 14 articles discussed multiple aspects of a transition, therefore, in Table 1 that section totals six higher than the overall number of articles.

Table 1. Characteristics of Chosen Articles

Descriptive Feature	Parent Education Level				Overall (n=14)
	No College (n=10)		Some College (n=4)		
Student Variables					
Class Standing					
Before 1 st year	3	(100%)	--		3 (21%)
During 1 st year	2	(100%)	--		2 (14%)
After 1 st year	2	(50%)	2	(50%)	4 (29%)
Longitudinal	2	(100%)	--		2 (14%)
Mixed years	1	(33%)	2	(50%)	3 (21%)
Types of transition					
Emotional	6	(86%)	1	(14%)	7 (50%)
Social	3	(33%)	6	(67%)	9 (64%)
Academic	3	(75%)	1	(25%)	4 (29%)
College traits					
Location					
Rural	2	(40%)	3	(60%)	5 (36%)
Urban	2	(67%)	1	(33%)	3 (21%)
Mixed	6	(100%)	--		6 (43%)
Type					
Public	4	(50%)	4	(50%)	8 (57%)
Private	1	(100%)	--		1 (7%)
Mixed	5	(100%)	--		5 (36%)
Date of Publication					
Pre-1999	2	(100%)	--		2 (14%)
2000-2004	2	(100%)	--		2 (14%)
2005-2009	4	(67%)	2	(33%)	6 (43%)
2010-current	2	(50%)	2	(50%)	4 (29%)

Discussion

The first year of an undergraduate's college career impacts the future of their post-secondary educational experience; "The character of one's experience in that year does much to shape subsequent experiences" (Tinto, p. 14). What happens after entry is more crucial than prior experiences to a student's decision to stay or leave an institution (Tinto, 1993). FGCs are different from traditional students "in both entering characteristics and experiences" (Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). The first part of the college experience is the transition process.

There are three types of transitions that students experience during the start of their college career; emotional (Aspelmeier, 2012; Barry, Hudley, Cho, & Kelly, 2008; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2006; Terenzini et al., 1996), social (Aspelmeier, 2012; Barry et al., 2008; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Hertel, 2002; Inkelas et al., 2006; Pittman & Richmond, 2007), and academic (Aspelmeier, 2012; Barry et al., 2008; Hertel, 2002; Ramos-sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Skaggs, 1989; Sy, Fong, Carter, Boehme, & Alpert, 2011; Terenzini et al., 1996; Tinto, 1993). Some people can handle the adjustment but "even the most able and socially mature" (Tinto, p.45) are overwhelmed and they leave.

Two additional aspects related to these transitions are incongruence, when students perceive themselves as not fitting in with the school community academically and/or socially, and isolation, the lack of interaction with those in the community. From these two, incongruence is typically more of a factor for leaving a smaller college versus attrition from a larger college is more often due to isolation (Tinto, 1993). FGCs are less likely to transfer but if they do they apply to large universities where they are among a larger crowd and feel less incongruence (Skaggs, 1989).

FGCs often feel less connected to a college than traditional students. The higher the level of a parent's post high school education the more connected and a sense of belonging to a college community students feel. Those whose parents never attended college feel even less connection than those whose parents completed some college and students whose parents graduated college feel a stronger sense of belonging in college than those whose parents completed some college (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). While traditional students have a greater sense of belonging on a college campus, FGCs sense a stronger connection with their high school (Pittman & Richmond, 2007). FGCs received more encouragement to continue on to college from high school teachers than parents (Terenzini et al., 1996). FGCs have less family engagement and receive less encouragement from their friends to stay enrolled than traditional students (Terenzini et al., 1996).

Many people will leave a school due to a lack of connection to faculty, students, and the school (Tinto, 1993). This has nothing to do with one's ability or persistence to be in and complete a degree program (Tinto, 1993). Students whose parents have attended college not only have a greater feeling of belonging but are also better socially adjusted to college (Hertel, 2002).

Social

Leaving college is more often related to social adjustment than because of not meeting the academic requirements of an institution (Tinto, 1993). The more integrated students are to a school the more likely they are to remain enrolled. Interactions with classmates and faculty in and outside of the class room lead to greater effort in the classroom by students (Tinto, 1993). "Degree and quality of personal interaction with other members of the institution are critical elements in the process of student persistence" (Tinto, p.56). The interactions need to feel genuine and important rather than forced in classes and student groups.

Students feel their involvement in a group or club on campus matters more when it is one of the groups close to the center of the student life (Tinto, 1993). If it is a group not viewed as important to the student life then students are more likely to leave as they do not feel they fit in with the core group of the college; an example of social incongruence (Tinto, 1993). Their level of confidence that they would fit in affects their social transition (Inkelas et al., 2006). The social transition also affects their academic drive. The more

involved in the community students are the more effort they are likely to put in to their academics (Tinto, 1993). The effort of those in the college community to interact with students “influences the quality of student effort” in regards to academics (Tinto, p.71). When students feel welcomed they feel encouraged to work harder in class.

Academic

Once in college, being a first generation college student does not impact student success (Dumais & Ward, 2010) even though they are less academically prepared for college, with lower critical thinking, reading, and math skills (Terenzini et al., 1996), and often take remedial classes (Chen, 2005). FGCs need targeted support (Terenzini et al., 1996) and small programs such as Living/Learning programs help FGCs with their academic and social transition (Inkelas, et. al).

Academically, FGCs do not perform as well as traditional students (Ramos-sanchez & Nichols, 2007), and by the end of the first year they have less credits and lower grade point averages (GPA) than traditional students (Chen, 2005). However, there is no difference in the gains that traditional students or FGCs make in the first year with math, reading, or critical thinking skills. Traditional students do not advance at a faster rate in that first year than FGC's. FGCs are starting behind and staying behind at the same interval (Terenzini et al., 1996).

For some FGCs it is more difficult for them to choose a major (Chen, 2005) while others know their major right away (Terenzini, et al., 1996). They are more likely to drop or repeat classes, need more time to complete programs (Terenzini et al., 1996) and less likely to earn a bachelor's degree (Chen, 2005). One cannot judge the route people take to complete their degree or their drive (Tinto, 1993) and as Skaggs (1989) states, there is a difference in aspirations about FGCs and traditional students. FGCs are less ambitious to earn a degree and have lower educational expectations (Terenzini et al., 1996). If parents went to college the aspirations were higher (Skaggs, 1989). According to Chen (2005), three in four planned on obtaining a degree-although that did not occur in one of his studies.

Some students have more cultural capital than others. Cultural capital is discussed and defined as “proficiency and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and approaches” (Collier & Morgan, 2008). FGCs are at a disadvantage with the college experience and it is harder because of their parents' lack of “experience and knowledge” (Barry et al., 2008). Many traditional students are able to role play a college student (act as expected) as they know what is ordinary from seeing family members go through the process. FGCs are role making; they are creating their own version of what they believe is expected of a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Traditional students are able to use roles as resources but for FGCs they do not know the student role and they do not have family members to use as resources. They have no one to ask questions to about school and receive less help from their parents in the preparation stages of college since they lacked experience with the college process (Choy, Horn, Nunez, & Chen, 2000; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Smith & Zhang, 2010). FGCs have a different understanding of how to be and what is expected of the role of a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2008). FGCs have to learn not only content in college but also how to play that role of a college student (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

FGC's reported higher self-doubt in being prepared for college, more time management issues, and having fewer resources to help them meet all commitments/demands (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Skaggs, 1989). On some issues, FGCs and traditional students agreed on the issues in school such as the syllabi, the importance of the professor understanding their life commitments, detail on writing assignments, and establishing rapport(Collier & Morgan, 2008). FGCs have less interaction with faculty and confront difficult graders (Smith & Zheng). FGCs wanted more detailed syllabi than traditional students and they did not know the importance of the syllabi (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Terenzini (1996) found that FGCs did not view faculty as concerned about their development as students. Interactions with faculty are integral in one's “judgments of intellectual congruence” (Tinto, p.53). When students had higher academic confidence they had a better transition (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

In addition to self-confidence, self-efficacy also plays a role in the academic transition (Ramos-sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Self-efficacy is one's belief in their abilities to complete a task, in this case to be academically successful. According to Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols (2007), the self-efficacy of FGCs did not decrease regardless of academic success; research shows whether students did poorly or satisfactorily, one's beliefs about their capabilities remained constant.

Generational status, defined as being first or second generation to attend college, did not affect student's self-esteem, adjustment, or GPA. Additionally, it minimally affected their locus of control but did affect the relationship between the psychology of students and their academic performance- this was strongest among FGC's (Aspelmeier, 2012). Self-efficacy was not found to be a mediator between generational status and academic results (Ramos-sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Traditional students had higher self-efficacy at the start and end of the school year. Self-efficacy did not increase for either group during the year (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). For both groups, if they had higher self-efficacy at the start of the year it was maintained throughout the year (Ramos-sanchez & Nichols, 2007). Self-efficacy and GPA were predicted by generational status but adjustment was not; if they had high self-efficacy, regardless of generational status, they had a better adjustment to college (Ramos-sanchez & Nichols, 2007).

Generational status was also tested as amplifying negative or positive outcomes. When students had high self-esteem, there was no difference between FGC's or traditional students. The opposite was true when students had lower self-esteem, and being a FGC increased the affect it had more than for traditional students (Aspelmeier, 2012).

FGCs who believe their parents emotionally support them have less stress during their transition to college (Sy et al., 2011). A survey was completed by students prior to the start of their freshman year. In the group 54% of the FGCs were Latina. FGCs in this study were defined as someone whose parents had zero college experience. These students had less parental emotional and informational support. Having a decrease of knowledge caused for stress for FGCs than having less emotional support. There was no difference in the stress level of FGCs from traditional students. As a predictor, FGCs who had more parental emotional support had less stress during the transition period. Parental informational support did not increase stress for FGCs or traditional students (Sy et al., 2011). FGCs lack the opportunity to discuss future stressful events, such as going to college, with parents as their parents have not had those experiences (Barry et al., 2008).

Minority and Money

FGCs who come from higher socioeconomic families have an easier time with their transition to college (Inkelas, et. al). Many students do not enroll directly after high school and that could be due to their poor academic preparation or financial difficulties (Chen, 2005). Many students have to work off-campus and the option to have an on-campus job helps with student integration (Tinto, 1993). FGCs are typically from lower income families, more likely to be women, and are often Hispanic or Black (Chen, 2005; Smith & Zhang, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996) and often persistence is affected by personal finances and financial aid helps increase persistence (Tinto,1993). "The likelihood of earning a four-year degree is more strongly associated with individual ability than socioeconomic status" (Tinto, p.30). They spend less hours studying and are less often involved in honors programs as a result of having to work more off campus, being older, or having dependents (Hertel, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1996).

FGCs are at a disadvantage in regards to access to college (Chen, 2005). If parents did not go to college their child's likelihood of going was less likely (Choy et al., 2000). Between 1992 and 2000, 22% of entering college freshmen were FGCs (Chen, 2005). Four out of ten FGC students who enrolled in that time left by 2000 (Chen, 2005).

It has been stated there is a certain type of personality of students who drop out of college (Tinto, 1993). The title of dropout is used for someone no matter the reason they left college, whether the reason be personal or academic. If colleges focus on students' "social and intellectual growth" (Tinto p. 4) there will be a higher retention rate. There is a difference between leaving a specific institution and transferring to another

(institutional depart) or if students leave higher education completely (system departure). Then there are those who take a leave of absence from a specific college and return to that college later on (institution stopout) and those who withdraw from higher education for a period of time but return to any institution after a leave (stopouts). There are some students who transfer between colleges after a couple of years at school (deferred transfer) or who do an immediate transfer within their first year at a school (Tinto, 1993). Pratt and Skaggs (1989) found as a result of their survey of FGCs during their initial week of college, using Tinto's model of attrition as a framework, that those students did not have a greater possibility of attrition.

There were many limitations with the literature found on the transition to college of first generation college students. For example, different definitions of FGCs, many of the studies were completed at only one institution, and lack of data from those who did leave about their reasons for doing so. There was no experimental research conducted where parts of programs or transitional courses were tested at an array of schools or with a variety of groups. The data collected about attrition rates are more accurate when individual reports are given than institutional reports but also more difficult to obtain (Tinto, 1993).

Conclusion

The academic, social, and emotional transition to college of FGCs can be compared and contrasted to those of traditional students. FGCs have a harder time with these aspects of the transition period and research shows they are often at a disadvantage (Tinto, 1993). There is no promise that the number of FGCs will decrease in the future and so it is important to continue to study this group of students so they can be as successful in college, if not more, as traditional students. This review of the literature found a lack of research on the transition of FGCs, defined as parents having some college experience, attending private rural and urban colleges. In addition to that gap there are numerous directions to be explored in future research. These areas include sub groups of first generation students (who parents had zero college experience), such as boys and girls, immigrants and American born citizens, those coming from one or two parent families, commuters and resident students, English Language Learners, Special Education students, the type of high school they attended and those who were homeschooled. These are just a few groups who can be compared to their traditional student counter parts or across groups to explore what aspects of the transition impact them the most and how they can be supported.

There is also a lack of research on orientation programs and the role they play in the transition of all students. This area can be explored to see if programs positively impact the transition of FGCs compared to traditional students in the areas mentioned in this review along with others such as the impact of a student's anxiety level during their time of transition. Research should focus on what makes programs successful for students and what is missing if the program does not help the student adjust in a positive manner, be it academically, socially, or emotionally.

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