

Telling Their Stories: Voices of First-Generation Students at a Midwestern University

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INTRODUCTION: First generation college students (FGCS) are those whose parents did not receive a Bachelor's degree. Although their numbers on college campuses are increasing, FGCS tend to have lower attendance and/or graduation rates than more traditional students. In response, universities have implemented programs and strategies to support and retain these students. However, FGCS are usually not involved in the decision-making process when universities are creating programs and systems to support them. This raises a question: What does this population really want or need that will assist with increasing their retention and graduation rates? The study used Tinto's Theory of Student Departure to learn how FGCS' academic and social engagement on campus affects their desire to persist to graduation.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study was to capture the perspectives of first-generation students attending a midwestern university to understand their needs, demands, and concerns to enable university administrators to develop and implement appropriate campus resources and programs.

METHODS: This qualitative study employed focus groups and individual interviews with 37 FGCS to gather their perspectives about their experiences at the university. Data were audio-recorded, transcribed, and entered in an online software program to facilitate inductive analysis. Data were coded, categories and themes were generated, and findings were identified.

RESULTS: While these FGCS students were academically engaged, their social engagement was minimal due to outside commitments to work and family. They could not rely on their families for help with navigating college, but all found someone to assist them, whether it was a campus resource or friends/peers. Many were adult learners who had overcome significant obstacles on their path to earning a college degree, which made them even more determined to persist to graduation. Many of these FGCS took advantage of campus resources, but some were not aware of specific services, such as assistance with textbooks and tutoring. Quality of advising was a concern and some students were confused about the roles and responsibilities of the advisors assigned to them from different campus departments.

CONCLUSION: The FGCS in the study were satisfied overall with their experience at the university and noted they had access to many supports and services to help them academically. These students lack of social engagement did not preclude them from being academically successful. They also identified several issues that, if addressed, could improve the experience and completion rates for FGCS.