

Introduction

During the past 20 years, and especially the last five, there has been significant growth in the number of first-generation (FG) students who have entered the academy (Peabody, Hutchens, Lewis, & Deffendall, 2011). In 2007, approximately 17% of entering first-year students were first-generation, but today, that number is roughly one out of three (Greenwald, 2012). FG students differ in significant ways from their non-first-generation peers in areas that range from racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic demography to academic preparation, transition to college, and parental role in the college choice process. (Billson & Terry, 1982; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Horn & Nunez, 2000). Specifically, FG students are more likely to be students of color, nonnative English speakers, immigrants, single parents, and financially independent from their parents (Bui, 2002). They are less likely to have access to rigorous secondary curriculum, such as advanced placement classes, mathematics, and ACT or SAT preparation, and are overrepresented in developmental or remedial courses in college. (Bui, 2002; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010a). Finally, they are less likely to begin college at a four-year institution (Karen, 2002), carry a full-time credit load, or complete a bachelor's degree (Cabrera, Burkum, & La Nasa, 2003).

Yet, for many of these students, the promise of matriculation falls short (ACT, 2013; Adelman, 2007; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Gaps in degree attainment and persistence for FG students are wide, with significantly fewer of them (27.4%) earning a degree after four years than students whose parents earned college degrees (42%; DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). This gap (14.7%) remains largely unchanged at the six-year mark, demonstrating that not only does the potential for college to serve as a medium for social mobility and equity remain unmet, but also that students may be leaving college with considerable debt and no degree.

In 2013, the Obama administration hosted a daylong summit attended by several hundred college presidents and focused on the role of educational access and success in fighting generational poverty (Tyre, 2014). The summit made clear that the success of low-income college students is tied to the country's larger issues of economic welfare, job preparedness, and civic engagement, and this issue is now a focal point of public discussions across educational, business, and community organizations (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010). It is clear that social class, race, and immigrant status are intertwined for many first-generation students. Thus, making good on the economic promises of higher education means attending to the needs of this population. A window of opportunity now exists for institutions to consider how their policies, practices, and politics need to change to more effectively serve all their students. This opportunity for changing institutional culture is coupled with an economic necessity to retain students, particularly as state funding has dwindled for higher education (Engle & O'Brien, 2007).

Previous literature on first-generation student persistence has considered multiple factors, such as lower GPA and ACT scores, parental income, English-language proficiency, and academic preparation for college. These issues all represent legitimate constraints to degree completion, but they can also serve to problematize the students themselves rather than explore the ways in which the academy has failed to adapt to this growing

population of students (Engle, 2007; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gibbons & Borders, 2010; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007). In addition, much attention has been given to the first-year experience of FG students because a significant portion of this population is not retained to the second year (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir, 2010a; Nuñez, 2011; Pascarella, 2004; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

The purpose of the study was two-fold: (a) to bring attention to the experience of low-income, FG students beyond the first-year and (b) to create space for these students to reflect back on their collegiate journey with the intent of capturing both the challenges they faced and the forms of agency they employed to persist. As such, participants were primarily junior and senior undergraduate students. Central to this report are the voices and narratives of predominantly low-income, FG college students—many of whom are immigrants or the children of recent immigrants. This demographic profile was intentional as we sought to reflect the growing diversity of FG students on campuses around the country. While most FG students begin college at a two-year institution, this study was set at a four-year institution. Thus, it provides important insights into educational experiences that facilitate or hinder baccalaureate degree completion but may offer limited understanding into two-year college experiences of FG students or the contexts that support transfer. Drawing on these student voices, the research and practice literature, and a theoretical framework described in the next section, this report considers institutional contexts with particular attention to FG students’

- demographics and multiple identities,
- postsecondary challenges and the dominant and nondominant means of capital they employed to navigate through college, and
- interactions with institutional agents (e.g., academic advisors, admissions representatives, student life staff, multicultural student support staff) that affect their college success.

The primary audience for this report is faculty members, staff, and administrators at four-year institutions. That said, the voices and contributions of the participants in this study add to our understanding of how educators and higher education professionals in a variety of institutional settings can best serve the first-generation student population.