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Ending the Notion of “I DO NOT BELONG HERE”
Recommendations for Predominantly White Institutions
to Support First Generation Student’s Success

Perla Castillo Calderon
Public and Community Service Studies
Senior Thesis

Part 1:

For the past two years, I have been fortunate enough to have a major that has allowed me to develop, researched, and study a topic I am passionate about- the complexities of a first-generation college student. Being a first-generation college student, myself, has been both eye-opening and a blessing. I have learned to navigate my ways around a college campus that not built for students like myself. For the past three and a half years, I have lived in three different worlds; college, home, and the one I have built for myself. The only similarity between them is me. I have learned the difficulties of trying to advance my education status and not feeling like an outsider. I have dealt with the hardship of understanding the shift in my values and belief system. While also loving and appreciating those family members who were not as privileged as me to have the opportunities to go through that shift. Finally, the last of those worlds is the combination of everything I have gone through as a Latinx first-generation woman.

During my freshman year, I became involved in a program for first-generation students. At the end of that year, I realized that if I became a coordinator, I could directly help the program. And so, my coordinator tenure began. As a coordinator, I noticed things missing, things that could be done in different ways. I quickly realized that the reason for this was the fact that apart from being a first-generation student of color- there was a tremendous amount of intersectionalities among the group. Each of us was uniquely different, and everyone brought something different to the program.

At the end of my year-long practicum class, I presented my final project a first-generation website with testimonial and resources for those students that were not fortunate enough to be part of the program. When asked to write a thesis for my senior capstone class, there was no doubt in my mind about the topic I will write.

This central thesis goal is to bring visibility to the first-generation identity. My goal is that when a student read the feel connected to it and they understand a little more what being first-generation means. When faculty, administrators, and or staff read this, I want them to realize how crucial this identity is for students and how much resources they need to be able to be successful.

The first part of this thesis explains what it means to be first-generation, how mentoring programs are supposed to run, and how beneficial extracurricular activities are. This first part is based on research and interviews I have conducted with current undergraduate Providence College students. The interviews were all conducted in person. Seven undergraduates' students participated, two seniors, three juniors, and two members of the sophomore class. Over fifteen hours of data were collected, involving three females, three males, and one gender nonbinary identifying students. The second part is a proposal for a centralized space where the first-generation identity is celebrated and easy to access resources on our campus. Centralized spaces are essential as it brings awareness to the issue and makes students feel seen and care about.

Defining First-Generation

According to the NASPA Center for First-Generation Student Success, there is approximately 43% (2018) of the total number of undergraduate students population identified as a first-generation or continuing generation. Being a first-generation college student means that both of your parents did not receive a bachelor's degree-level education. While being part of the continuing- generation student group, means at least one of your parents attended and received a bachelor's degree or higher from a Higher Education institution.

However, even with this definition, there is still a struggle to find a common language among what being a first-generation student entitled. The federal definition used by many

institutions and the Pell Grant- federally funded financial aid; is students who come “from families where their biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree” (2018). This definition does not encompass all of the layers and factors that make a first-generation college student.

The issue of not having a set definition is troublesome, as this community is fragile. The damage that occurs when a precise definition is not established goes beyond a lack of identity for students, as they do not know how to define themselves. It also creates a cracked system of help at the institutional level, as this allows them not to understand what population of students they are supposed to be serving. “Moreover, by not having a definition, it is nearly impossible for an institution to identify these students, track their academic and co-curricular progress, pinpoint needs for early intervention, highlight successes, measure critically important learning outcomes, and benchmark against other institutions and national data sets” (2018).

The answer to “are you a first-generation student?” will depend on who you are asking. The absence of a specific common language when it comes to what a first-generation student is has the potential of ruining someone’s future and for identities to not be developed, which leads to multiple other problems within the student. According to a study conducted by Robert K. Toutkoushian, a University of Georgia professor, there are eight different definitions of being the first generation. These are just what they were able to come out with, not including the national Higher Education Act or the three different ones from the Department of Education.

First-Generation versus Continuing-Generation Students Stressors

As aforementioned, the difference between these two groups is simply one parent earning a bachelor’s degree. Still, the results are tremendous as “studies consistently indicate that first-generation student’s complete bachelor’s degrees at approximately half the rate of their

continuing-generation peers.” This shows how much of a difference that is having a parent that has experienced the college process makes, Garriott & Nisle talks about this on their 2017 publication.

Stress, coping, and perceived academic goals are common among the community. First-generation and continuing-generation students each face common stressors associated with college adjustment. These may include, but are not limited to, “living away from home for the first time; adjusting to the rigor of college-level classes, developing friendships, and time management” (2017). Any adjustment period is challenging, but for someone that has nothing to relate to, it is even more challenging. This sentiment is even stronger on first-generation students, as they faced even more unique challenges based on their social class backgrounds. For example, first-generation students often do not have parents who can help them navigate the college environment.

“Additional research suggests the cultural mismatch between higher education institutions’ individualistic norms and first-generation students’ interdependent motives for attending college, can help explain their relatively lower academic performance. Other unique stressors first-generation college students may face include increased work demands, more tremendous family pressures, and increased financial stress. Higher education institutions must focus on providing forms of support to ensure equitable outcomes for first-generation students and disrupt the regeneration of educational disparities present today” (Garriott & Nisle, 2017).

With all of these stressors, it has proven that campus support is extremely crucial to the well-being of students who carry this identity. The bottom line is, first-generation nor continuing generation students can do it by themselves. The institution must offer support, and beyond that, they need to make sure that what they offer is what these students need, not just what the institution perceived. The earlier these resources are made public; the faster stressors can be controlled. It is proven that “early programmatic interventions aimed at first-generation students’ college may also be facilitative in terms of access to institutional support later in their academic

careers.” Interviewee #5 express the importance of getting to students early enough by saying, “These conversations should be happening before you declare to go to the school.” By declaring their resources first, the first-generation identity is out in the open, and conversation surrounding it will be inevitable. The resources available need to be promoted in a way that students can access when they are looking for it instead of being spread across campus like a lot of institutions have it.

Findings suggest that there is a clear correlation between institutional support and how well first-generation students performed academically and socially. Having direct access to supports such as mentors, faculty advisors, tutoring services, and people that look like they help alleviate stress within the community. Interviewee #4 said, “I do not feel helped from the school” when they first got admitted, as they did not have a centralized space to find the resources Providence College has to offer. Institutional support must be there, and there is no other way. There is a dire need for faculty to believe students, as they serve as a role model to many of these students. Interviewee #4 also shared, “Some professors don’t see our abilities as a first-generation student- they think we are not good enough.” Professionals working in higher education- in any capacity- must be educated on the many identities a student may carry. No student should feel like they are not supported by the person they are supposed to be learning from.

Mentoring Programs

“Mentoring has oftentimes been touted as critical to the academic success of underrepresented students defined as first-generation college students and/or students of color.” (Smith, 2009). However, mentoring programs are not necessarily meeting the needs of the student population they are serving. Ranking in 10th place for college attainment, the United

States has the highest dropout rates among developed nations. This clearly shows that the country as a whole needs to be better with its education system and that there is something wrong with the ways mentoring programs are run in higher education institutions.

A Latinx male student stated that “They [mentoring programs] are student-lead” and that is the reason as to why students get burnout as they have to be continually fighting for not only their personal needs but those of the group they represent. The student even goes as far as saying that Providence College is content with these programs being students lead because “they just attach their name to it” and celebrate when students start succeeding. One interviewee expressed this sentiment; he states, “students must do everything- and even then, there are hoops and loops you must jump.”

Having interviewed both mentors and mentees, Smith suggests three recommendations on how mentoring programs can do better. The first one is to “Work with a network mentoring model,” as it allows for the students to make more incredible connections and not fall under the idea that their one-to-one mentorship is not working because of compatibility. The second is to “design a mentoring curriculum handbook,” this focuses on the idea of improving both the academic, cultural capital, and the social capital of the student. The final one is to “improve the evaluation of mentoring programs,” there is not much real research done on mentoring programs as they are so hard to evaluate with accurate quantitative data. This is due primarily to the idea that each institution runs a unique of each program- based on its needs.

Building academic, cultural capital is a must, and institutions must know themselves before they can mentor someone. Most institutions run from the majority perspective point of view, which makes them lack an understanding of what first-generation needs. Cultural capital is defined as what individuals know, in terms of skills, education, experiences, and other privileges,

that grant them a higher status in life. Institutional knowledge must be provided for the institution to be able to provide successful mentorship programs. As more often than not, the majority perspective is spread from top to bottom, influencing anything from administration to the student organizations and clubs, which results in the minority values and beliefs not being included in it.

They need mentors to guide them through the higher education maze and to narrow the divide between the students and the institutions' culture. Like learning a new language, the "hidden curriculum" is not always easy to understand. Students have to not only navigate a whole new institution but now they must learn the ins and outs of it and figure out their respected institution's culture. Students must learn how to maneuver between these cultures, especially if they are from different backgrounds. As some students are navigating over three different cultures, their home, the institution, and the one they are creating for themselves. Just as academic, cultural capital is essential, building social capital is also extremely important. Smith states, "Mentor programs cannot focus on simply providing access to "superficial networks." They must intentionally foster the development of students' social capital that will enable them to create and sustain strong academic mentoring social relationships" (Smith 2009). Both of these capitals build upon each other, and one must not exist without the other. A sharp educational mentoring program looks very different than just a superficial one. A mentoring program can measure their success when members feel like they belong and that they can take the skills they learn and apply them to the real world. A robust social capital is necessary for both the institution and the students.

Providence College hosts a valid number of mentoring programs. The First- Generation Peer Mentoring Program, Horizons Program, and Friars Foundation Programs all were

mentioned by the interviewees when asked to name any resources they know PC offers. All three of these programs provide supports to the majority of people of color- with two being specific for students of color. When asked about any other programs- most could not think of any. This shows the lack of knowledge current students have about programs their school offers.

Providence College needs to advertise these and other programs in an exact cohesive way.

Students are suffering because they are not aware of the resources the institution has the offer.

For example, this student says – “I do not think I would know about her [ESL Specialist] if I did not participate in FFP [Friars Foundation Program]- she is visible to international students but not every student.”

Extracurricular Activities at a Predominantly White Institution

Recently, there has been studies conducted to measure the correlation between extracurricular activities involvement and the success of underrepresented students at predominantly white institutions. Confer in a 2019 study conducted by Hurd & Billingsley, “Marginalizing experiences such as discriminatory treatment may lead underrepresented students to underperform academically relative to their majority white. However, involvement in extracurricular activities may help to neutralize or offset the harmful effects of discrimination on underrepresented students’ psychological well-being.” With all of these factors in mind, attending a Predominantly White Institution is not an easy thing for underrepresented students who carries a multitude of different identities. However, we also see how involvement in extracurricular activities can make it more bearable for these students. This is since participation helps students feel like they belong. As many activities end up being something that the student cares about, therefore they serve as a beacon of hope and want to make institutional and personal changes.

Coming from a low-income and first-generation background, students often feel excluded and even intimidated at these predominantly white colleges and universities. This feeling is of particular concern for underrepresented students as they are likely to possess multiple social identities at risk of marginalization. These intersectionalities are used to explain how these social identities intertwine to impact each student lived experience on their respective campus. Furthermore, it affects the individual's overall well-being, including but not limited to their mental health, physical health, and academic performance.

Even though there seem to be multiple factors impeding underrepresented students from doing well in their academics, the students that are involved in clubs and organizations they care about often performed better. Research that was conducted twelve years apart found that “demonstrated that some underrepresented students display high academic achievement in the face of risks such as discriminatory treatment.” The notion of resilience in the face of risk is present in these findings, as these students are not letting anything stop them from reaching their goals. A member of the class of 2021 states that she learned how to “use [her] environment to [her] advantage” and that her involvement on campus made her “appreciate [hers] womanhood, blackness, and first-generation identity”

It has been researched and confirmed by Hurd & Billingsley in 2019, that “underrepresented college students are likely to experience feelings of isolation and social disconnection at PWIs” the reason for this is the notion that students feel discriminated against. A 21 years old Latinx male student said, “I feel like I do not belong here [Providence College], but through the cultural club I have been part of, I have found a home in a place not meant for me.” This is why it is critical for Predominantly White Institutions to offer opportunities where spaces are available that allow these students to feel like they belong. Extracurricular activities

provided this as they enable students to connect with like-minded peers that share similar values and identities.

Additionally, involvement in extracurricular activities may be able to “offset or neutralize the experience of stigmatization, exclusion and resulting depressive symptoms stemming from discriminatory treatment by helping underrepresented students to feel included and connected to similar others,” also according to Hurd & Billingsley (2019). As part of their human nature, students gravitate to people that are similar to them. First-generation students are no exceptions.

Part 2:

Recommendation for a First- Generation Resource Center at Providence College

Providence College benefits from multiple programs directed at first-generation students' success. Programs like the First-Generation Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) and the PC1G Program are both dedicated to making sure first-generation students have a successful four years. While PMP is a “multidimensional first-generation organization that empowers students of color and guides them towards their highest potential at Providence College.” PC1G focuses on helping “first-generation students and their families find resources, programs, and campus partners, so that they may thrive at Providence College.” Their main mission is the same- to help first-generation students of all types.

With all of the resources are offering, there is still something that is lacking. There is not a campus-wide initiative or space for first-generation. Resources on campus are scattered around, and there is no common space for a student to go and ask for help. As aforementioned above, in part of my research, we have found that students carrying this complex identity are underrepresented when it comes to a common language. They also do not have a space to call

home at Providence College (and various other institutions) or find resources. Both programs mentioned above have limitations to them and therefore are not able to help the entire first-generation student population at PC.

One of the biggest limitations is the fact that the student must self-identify as first-generation when they first submit their application. As we know, due to the lack of a standard definition, not all students realize they are first-generation before going to college. One student said: “I am a current senior, and I only found out I am first-gen after my friend was talking about getting invited to a ceremony celebrating first-generation students on campus.” This makes for offering resources difficult because there is not correct data collection and information on this campus population.

A First- Generation Resource Center will help not only self-identifying students but also those that they do not realize carry the identity, and the biggest benefactor will be the overall campus community. Students interviewed expressed a common theme- this center will represent a sense of belonging for first-generation students across the campus. A senior class member said, “the center will make a difference; the first-generation conversation will be inevitable.” While a Junior said it would “change the culture of the campus,” – awareness will come to the identity, and people will be more open to embracing differences.

Apart from the community- the main center goal is to centralize resources. Programs like PMP and PC1G lack the strength to accommodate every first-generation student on campus. Therefore, when different departments and offices come together in a single space and start providing all the resources the college has to offer, the students will know exactly where to find them, instead of having to jump loops and hoops to locate these resources. As according to

various students interviewed, a vast majority of resources are offered at Providence College, but they are staggered between offices, instead of one person spearheading it.

A list of resources that were given by students included the following, Office of Academic Services, Career Education Center, PMP, PC1G, Center at Moore Hall, Friars Foundations Program, and the Multicultural Scholarships Program. These programs offer resources for students, but they are not at their full potential. As the majority of them are student-run and the burden of bringing both awareness and recognition to this identity while also completing their college journey falls on them. These resources are also not visible to all, and a sophomore class member explains that she was only able to find out about the English as a Second Language Specialist because she was a member of a particular group. She goes further and tells the story of how she had to be the one to let a friend know about these resources as there were “no promotion or reaching out” on the office part to students that may benefit from this. There is also a problem of student’s participant overlapping within organizations which leads to a group of students getting these resources more than once but a good majority of students zero. This is because a lot of the programs targeted at the diverse community, but as we know, being first-generation is about income or/ and race.

Students want a space out in the open, not placed in the basement of a building, so it “shows that we do exist” said a junior class member. Another Junior says he wants an “a welcoming place for everyone to be accepted and feel like themselves.” A class of 2022 member states, “I want this space to feel like home- because, at home, I am the most comfortable.” While a current senior said, “We must not forget, first-generation students, need more than just academic resources, this space must be able to provide career, wellness, financial, and mental

health help.” Space should be a one-stop space, where students can find everything they are looking for.

If Providence College were to offer a physical space to celebrate this identity- they would be showing they care. Being a first-generation college student can be isolating. Going to the process of it all by yourself and still expected to be the best possible version of yourself is, though. A physical space will provide students that carry this identity and multiple other ones to feel at peace and to know that the institution cares for them. There are already spaces that celebrate different identities or enhance the cultural capital of the school, and a first-generation space is needed. Students are asking for it, a Latinx Female member of the sophomore class said, “They [PC] thinks they are already giving us a lot by updating Moore Center. But we need more than that; we need a center that represents us and all the complexity of this identity.”

A tuition-driven institution should spare no expense when it comes to providing this space. Not only is it necessary for the students but also the community as a whole. This space will provide centralized resources to students, faculty, staff, and administrators, and it will distinguish Providence College from other college campuses. It will help with both the brand and the reputation of the college. PC200 is a strategic college plan put in place for the betterment of the school, and this plan has three main goals with various subcategories. One of their goals is to “respond to national trends in the changing demographics of college-age students through focused recruiting, relevant programming, and scholarships funded through philanthropy,” they hope to accomplish this throughout two different initiatives. Each of these can be used as a reasoning for PC, offering a physical space for first-generation students.

Number one is “increasing recruiting efforts in geographical areas with growing and diverse populations of college-age students who would be drawn to the cultural, spiritual, and

intellectual experience offered by Providence College.” Students of all kind are admitted to Providence College every academic year, all of the identities these students carry must be celebrated. Their second one is “developing and regularly assessing curricular and co-curricular experiences that foster inclusion and mutual respect, and that meets the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.” A first-generation center/ space will provide for inclusion and will hit their co-curricular target.

There is immense pride in the Friars Family, many students get told, “You have to go to PC; it is going to change your life,” Let’s make sure we are inclusive of all and are changing everyone’s lives for the better. This centralized space will not only narrow the road for first-generation college students, but it will also give students the sense that they DO belong at Providence College and any other higher education institution they attend.

Conclusion

This two-part thesis strives to establish changes when it comes to first-generation students in predominately white institutions- especially, Providence College. I wrote about the importance of a unified definition, how a good mentoring program looks like, and the difference between a first-generation student and a continuing-generation student. In part, I introduce the idea that Providence College will benefit from creating a resource center dedicated to the needs of these students.

The fight for the usage of a common language that will serve as a form of unification among the first-generation community and the formation of space/center is not over. But the first step is already taken, people are talking about it and starting to normalize the conversation around a population that oftentimes believe they do not belong in places of academia.

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