Life as a First Billiken

First Generation Interviews
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Background

- Two approaches to defining first generation
- One-third of all students entering college nationally and 15% SLU students are first generation
- Non-traditional, minority background, non-native English speaker, child dependents, disability
- A 29% difference in graduation rates for first generation students (NCES, 2010). Over 25% drop out within first year.
“First-generation students lack much of the capital that their non-first-generation counterparts enjoy because their parents do not possess the information, familiarity, jargon, cultural understanding, experience, and emotional bearings that the students need to effectively tackle the challenges of the college environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Oldfield, 2007; Purswell, Yazedjian, & Toews, 2008; Schultz, 2004; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Sundberg, 2007).”
Interviews

• Three group interviews – eight students
• Questions about resources, involvement, challenges and growth over first semester
• Response categories for coding
• Five major themes
• Other observations
“People will know I don’t belong here”

“I was really nervous coming in that it was going to be everybody had come from a background that their parents or their family members had gone to college and I would be the only one who didn’t know what was going on.”

“I feel alone and I know I’m not alone, so I want to know that there are other people out there that are experiencing the same thing as me.”
Self-confidence and self-reliance

“I feel like it’s a big accomplishment family-wise no matter what background you come from, being the first in anything is definitely a big accomplishment. I do identify myself as that (first-generation), again to be proud of it.”

“Someone very close to me told me I wasn’t good enough to go here, so I wanted to prove them wrong.”
“I also got a scholarship from here, so that kind of says something. Like I could have went to Meramec for free but I didn’t. I decided to come here on a scholarship. That means they wanted me bad enough to give me a scholarship.”
High standards and motivation

“I would say right now academics is my main focus just because I didn’t have such a great first semester and so I know that I want to make it a lot better this semester... But also I just connected that as with my future too. I’m just motivating myself, telling me that I have to stay stuck with my academics if I want to have a good turnout afterwards.”
“I’ve been considering changing my major because I’m afraid of med school... ever since I was younger I had a plan, I wanted to be a doctor. And now I don’t have a plan and I’m really freaked out about it, so my main focus is getting a plan when it should be academics.”
Invest in those who invest in them

“In my OT dept., that’s my major by the way, the professor, she makes it seem like there is absolutely no stupid question and she’s probably the biggest resource I have academically on campus. She’s so sweet, she’s so helpful, she really seems like she really cares about each individually student. She’s very patient when she explains our schedule, our curriculum, especially like right now we’re going through some curriculum changes... I think she would definitely be #1.”
“I went and talked to my financial aid counselor once and it was just kind of awkward and weird. It was just like she was like, alright I’ll hurry up and answer your question then could you please get out of my office, that’s kind of the feeling I got.”
College as a family experience

“A lot of my family is just really proud. I don’t want to disappoint them and it’s not that I’m doing it for them. I’m doing it for myself but it’s really nice to know that they’re behind me even though they don’t really understand what’s going on other than I carry around a lot more books than I used to.”
“I feel like my family doesn’t support my decision, although they’ve never been to college like I said and they don’t know how hard it is for me right now. They are trying to push me to pursue my dream, which I understand completely, but I definitely need more support from the family aspect of it... I think that’s what bogs me down and takes my mind off academics. I’m so worried about pleasing my family and it makes it really hard whenever I know they’re not happy with my decision.”
Other observations

- Financial concerns lead to emphasizing having a job, being unable to live on campus, being stressed about aid availability
- Classify involvement on campus as below average
-Already focused on internships, graduate programs, medical or law school
- Take on responsibility of caring or providing for family members
Implications

- Acknowledge and appreciate first-generation students’ ability to succeed
- Focus on relationship building to better support and offer resources
- Understand college as an experience for entire family, how to help entire unit navigate college
- Help student leaders understand unique challenges
Limitations

• Small group size
• Many qualities apply to all SLU students
• Unable to track any progress, no pre and post
Next step

- Exploring possibility of a mentorship program
- Pairing first-year First Billikens with former first-generation faculty/staff
- Specifically focused on discussing challenges of first-generation experience, encouragement and preparation for the future
- Putting a proposal and transition report together
Ward, Siegel and Davenport- “Our capacity to have an impact on first-generation student success comes from

- Making an institutional or programmatic commitment that expresses the value we place on these students
- Deciding what we want these students to achieve and how we want them to change as a result of their educational experiences
- Creating high-quality learning environments that deliver those changes.”
“It’s really nice getting advice from teachers and other people, but it would be really nice to know that not only am I getting worthwhile advice from someone, I’m getting worthwhile advice from someone who knows what it’s like and is speaking to me in terms of experiences that I am now going through or have gone through.”
References


Questions?