

# The First Ones: Three Studies on First-Generation College Students

Rob Longwell-Grice, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Nicole Zervas Adsitt, Cayuga Community College

Kathleen Mullins, Front Range Community College

William Serrata, South Texas College

*The findings from 3 qualitative research studies related to first-generation college students show themes of strains in family relationships and lack of practical familial support. One study reveals sources of resiliency and persistence of graduate students; another explores sense of belonging for undergraduates attending 3 types of private institutions; the final study features concerns of Latinos at a 2-year college. Together these studies show that creation of a student identity creates unique challenges for those transitioning into bicultural persons. Advisors who understand students coping with changing family status while attending college can proactively guide them toward the degrees they seek. Furthermore, administrators should provide programs and professional development that help advisors address the complex issues facing first-generation students.*

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Enrolling in large numbers, first-generation students depend upon academic advisors and college administrators to navigate the institution, and to lead properly, these guides must develop a deep understanding of first-generation student experiences (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013; Vander Schee, 2007; Ward, Seigel, & Davenport, 2012). As higher education offers a pathway to occupational success and social status, the college degree remains highly valued and attractive to first-generation students looking to advance their circumstances. In addition to confronting all the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties that most college students face, first-generation students also experience unique cultural, social, and academic transitions (Ishitani, 2006; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Approximately 43% of all first-year college students identify as first in their families to seek a college education (Chen &

Carroll, 2005; Choy, 2001). Despite composing a large percentage of matriculants, first-generation students do not graduate at the same rate as their peers with at least one parent who attended college (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2005). Compared to students with college-educated parents, first-generation college students report receiving less assistance in preparing for the postsecondary environment (Choy, 2001), feeling less supported while attending college (Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008), and lacking a sense of belonging to the institution they attend (Choy, 2001). All of these factors affect recruitment and retention of first-generation students and make the transition to college particularly challenging for them (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

According to Tinto (1990), relationships students form (or not) with faculty members affect retention. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) showed that student–faculty member relationships improve the odds of persistence for first-generation students, but they also found that first-generation men showed reluctance in cultivating this necessary rapport. Similarly, Pascarella et al. (2004) explained that despite the dependence of first-generation student success on supportive relationships with faculty and staff members, these students, many from low-income or working-class families, neither found nor maintained such interactions. The studies presented herein collectively demonstrate the crucial contribution of the relationship with academic advisors for the retention of first-generation college students.

In this paper, we present findings from three qualitative research studies we conducted separately, with one of us alternately taking the lead, on first-generation college students. The studies represent cross sections of the U.S. campus population and demonstrate that the issues confronting first-generation college students cut across race, gender, and type of school. The studies offer snapshots of larger, in-depth studies presented at the 2008 NACADA annual conference (Longwell-Grice, Zervas Adsitt, Mullins, & Serrata, 2008). We chose to use qualitative methods because they provide an

opportunity for rich reflection and in-depth exploration of the complex, multidimensional experiences and issues of first-generation students.

The populations studied included graduate students at a 4-year public university, undergraduates at small private colleges, and Latinos at a 2-year institution. We conducted all three studies to further understand the complex issues confronting first-generation college students. We present the findings as a contribution toward advisor education on the issues confronting first-generation college students and the ways in which academic advisors can help them succeed.

The authors of literature on these students inconsistently define first-generation status (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007). While some, such as Longwell-Grice (2010), included students whose parents never completed college, other researchers considered gradients of parental education for the sake of comparison (Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004; Pascarella et al., 2004). For our studies, we considered a student of first-generation if neither parent completed a college degree.

Although their definitions used for first-generation vary, researchers consistently documented first-generation students' lack of the institutional knowledge helpful for achieving academic success. This absence of experienced-based information compromises first-generation students' ability to ask the questions that yield proper direction for navigating the cultures and bureaucracies of higher education. This insufficient inquiry, compounded with the unlikelihood that family members can provide the guidance needed, creates challenges for attaining a higher education that seem insurmountable for some first-generation college students.

### First-Generation Graduate Students

For one study, we conducted a qualitative interview to better understand the experiences of first-generation college students in master's level graduate programs at a 4-year public university in the Northwest. We sought to learn the ways first-generation graduate students addressed and negotiated multiple identities, cultural transitions, and marginality both within their family and academic cultures (London, 1992; Orbe, 2004; Ward et al., 2012). As the underlying intent, we identified factors contributing to first-generation student persistence and resilience.

### Participants

One member of our research team (Mullins) selected the study sample—the first person in a

family to graduate from college—from the population of all students in master's level programs at the university. She used snowball sampling to locate information-rich key informants who could help identify other information-rich individuals willing to participate in the study. Ultimately, the sample consisted of 9 students: 5 men and 4 women; 7 identified as White or Caucasian, and 2 identified as non-White (American Indian and biracial).

### Methods

Qualitative methods were applied to the 90-minute, in-depth, individual interviews of the 9 student participants. The interview protocol (Appendix A) was informed by a literature review, particularly the work of Orbe (2004) on multiple identities and first-generation students. The protocol also reflected stories of first-generation academics (Burke & Johnston, 2004; Dews & Law, 1995; Linkon, 1999; Rendón, 1996; Verdi & Ebsworth, 2009; Warnock & Appel, 2012). The first two items were designed to establish rapport and place the student's experience in the context of his or her family's experience with education. Items 3 and 4 explored the student's decisions to seek both undergraduate and graduate degrees. The subsequent set of probes engaged the student in deeper reflection on her or his experiences in graduate school; specifically, the student was asked to consider the effect of being a first-generation student on the experience. After these key items about school, the student addressed three questions about ways identity as a first-generation college student affected (or not) relationships with family members and friends. Finally, the interview ended with four closing questions designed to solicit any new insights or unexamined issues.

To field test the interview protocol, a student affairs assessment professional and two first-generation graduate students were consulted, and based on their input, the interview questions were modified and refined. Specifically, additional closing questions were included and follow-up or probing questions associated with each original item were added.

### Analysis

Creswell (2003) explained analysis of qualitative data as “an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data” (p. 190). In addition to undertaking this ongoing reflection on

the data collected in the interviews, Mullins listened to the audiotapes and read the transcripts to develop a general sense of the information. She began identifying commonalities and shared experiences among the participants. She also looked for data that mirrored or expanded upon the literature on this subject. After developing codes for these themes, she added the codes to the transcripts and organized the data accordingly, looking for related topics to group together. She reported on these themes, both convergent and divergent, together with salient quotes from the interviewees.

## Results

The 9 graduate students in the study shared several factors that contributed to their educational resiliency, including attending high schools that offered Advanced Placement (AP) classes and challenging curricula as well as employed teachers who expected all students to go to college and who received support from an affluent parent population. In addition to the resiliency factors developed through quality K-12 education, the majority of these first-generation graduate students benefited from a significant amount of emotional support from at least one parent; however, this support was general, not specific. For the most part, parents of these students expressed pride in their accomplishments and pleasure with their abilities, but they did not pressure their children to succeed academically.

Interviews reveal that a strong work ethic added a third resiliency factor for all the participants. Some also expressed an aptitude for academic work, love of learning, desire to serve others, ability to balance passion for a field of study with career-minded practicality, interest in upward mobility, and financial resources (e.g., scholarships) in addition to their family's regular income. In addition, some students had attended community colleges, and one had participated in the federal Ronald E. McNair Postbaccalaureate Achievement Program as an undergraduate.

Overall, the students in this study did not express anxiety about academic competency or competitiveness; after successful undergraduate experiences, they seemed secure in their academic performances. However, several described discomfort with academic discourse and the culture of academia with which they reported a struggle to overcome. Others shared stories of classroom and department-based marginalization based on socioeconomic class.

According to the participants, the biggest cultural transition they faced involved bringing their graduate-student identity home. Some just did not do it. Several of the participants—who made clear that they value the support and respect the intelligence of their family members—expressed disappointment about losing the ability to talk with their parents or other family members about issues or ideas important to them. One student described this loss as “eclipsing” his family members. Like most graduate students, the participants shared a passion for learning and great enthusiasm for their subjects. They enjoyed discussing big ideas and theoretical concepts. Ironically, they found that the articulation about issues they loved often resulted in an unwanted distance from the family members who had originally encouraged them to attend college.

## First-Generation Undergraduates in Private Institutions

In another study, we examined the experiences of first-generation undergraduates in private institutions. Because the study by Zervas Adsitt was conducted as part of a research apprenticeship in a doctoral program, the initial research question was intentionally broad to encourage exploration of the topic: How do first-generation college students make sense of their college experience in 2- and 4-year private schools? The study makes clear that first-generation students experience complex and contextual situations. Participants explained the need to traverse the different worlds of home and school that they inhabit. The findings offer evidence for these transitional issues of first-generation students and explain the ways students learn to find their own way amid these complexities.

## Sample

Fourteen first-generation college students from three different private institutions of higher education in the Northeast were recruited and volunteered for this study. Students were recruited through e-mails sent to names on electronic distribution lists. At each of the three institutions an administrator coordinated the lists and approved the e-mails sent. The responding students represented a diversity of gender, race, and ethnicity. Because first-generation students do not make up a homogeneous group, this sampling of the multiple and intersecting identities allows for greater recognition of the complicated

situations that first-generation students learn to apprehend and navigate.

In addition to a private 2-year nursing college, two private 4-year institutions—a medium residential college and a large residential research university—made up the pool for the sample. The three very different institutional types provided rich and diverse data.

### Methods

Qualitative research methods were employed through semi-structured interviews (as described by Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) designed to gain a deeper understanding of each informant's experiences as well as to understand each participant's manner of thinking and the ways he or she makes meaning of experiences. Participants completed two, three, or four individual interviews of 30 to 45 minutes each. Zervas Adsitt audiotaped and transcribed the interviews as well as documented the observations on each campus, which provided different contexts for the analysis.

A list of prepared questions (Appendix B) was used to loosely guide the interview, allowing students to reveal their narratives. In some cases interviews followed a simple chronological progression from talking about the high school experience, to the transition to college (including decisions to attend college), the way the student chose the institution, and descriptions of the first college semester. In follow-up interviews, the questions were more structured and featured follow-up inquiries on key aspects of the initial interview. Probes were used to find out more about a topic emerging from the initial interview. For example, in a first interview, one student discussed her experiences in the band, and in the follow-up interview, the questions focused on the student's band experiences. In the second exchange, the student revealed feelings of culture shock while participating in band that she had not experienced elsewhere on campus. The discussion extended into the complexities of race, class, and gender as well as ways the student negotiated college to participate with the dominant majority on campus.

### Analysis

The symbolic interactionism approach, used for this study, allows informants to share the ways that they make meaning of their experiences within a given context (as per Blumer, 1969). Because individuals make meaning of their experiences through interactions (Blumer, 1969),

their recollections represent an interpretative process in a social context (in this case, the college setting). Higher education creates an important context for making sense of experiences because first-generation students often confront new sets of values and norms in the college campus culture.

During the data analysis, Zervas Adsitt looked for relevant issues and engaged with theories related to cultural capital to assign themes. She used the theory of cultural capital as a framework to interpret these data (Bourdieu, 1977), which help explain the disconnect many first-generation students feel at home after they matriculate into college. Interviewees described the negotiations they made at home and at school to reconcile the two different contexts. They reported struggling at school with the values of the institution related to cultural and social capital, and at home they saw that adopting the values of the institution could create distance from their families.

### Results

Three themes emerged from this research of undergraduates in private schools. First, in their descriptions of navigating campus, many reported learning the rules to guide interactions in and out of the classroom. They portrayed a type of cultural dislocation and referred to feeling lost and at times marginalized. Olivia, a Latina attending the research university, explained:

Um, [pause] and I feel like there's [sic] unwritten rules of a culture and it takes a while to really adapt to them, and I feel like even now I haven't really caught all of 'em. I'm kinda oblivious to some things, you know.

She related feelings of disconnect to socioeconomic status, saying "Mm, 'cause, a lot of people here come from a very wealthy background, so it's really hard to develop a good relationship with them."

Olivia perceived that the rules governing life at the private university were intricately connected to issues of social class. As a student who described herself as growing up poor, Olivia recognized that the rules governing life at the private university were intricately connected to issues of social class. This perception contributed to a sense of marginalization for Olivia and others in the study.



Second, students demonstrated resilience as they handled the complexities associated with their college experience. As both worlds (home and college) come into conflict with each other, support structures prove critical to the success of first-generation students. Participants in this study sought support through connections on campus. Jessica described relying on her mentors, but she wished for more support:

I feel like I have four mentorships, seriously, I have [she names four faculty members], but I don't really know, but I definitely think of them as my mentors. I definitely go to them for advice. Then I don't mind being a [peer] mentor, but I need some serious advising myself.

First-generation students in this study found the ability to work through issues with mentors and peers critical to their successful navigation of the landscape. These connections helped them manage the extra work required of first-generation students as they traverse the margins of two worlds.

Finally, participants described managing their family relationships while addressing the challenges that arose from their evolving identity as a college student. Some discussed the varying strategies they used to maintain relationships and negotiate their role within the family as they also embraced their life as a student. Liz, a young, White woman from the private university explained:

So, my mom would be like, "Oh, college students like they think just 'cause they go to college they're smarter and they deserve more money." So, it's kinda like I hope she doesn't think [that way] about me. I mean I know she doesn't because she wants me to be here and she knows it's good, and she wants me to do better than she did. But, I felt, like, that the first year like, "Is my mom gonna think, 'oh, she's a college student?'"

Liz found that she needed to integrate her role as a college student into her identity in a way that allowed her to maintain her family relationships. Bobby, a transfer student at the private university, talked about the experience of going home:

My conversations are different, my perspective is different, um, just my mind is in a whole different place and my family . . . it's like, "[Bobby] thinks that his stuff don't stink" . . . you know, and that's a total misinterpretation because in their mind I abandoned something.

### **Summary on Three-Institution Undergraduate Study**

This study addressed one small piece of a complex and important issue affecting degree attainment in higher education: Although first-generation students are gaining access, without the necessary support structures, they may not realize their potential. The experiences of the students in this study illustrate the importance of faculty members and advisors in helping first-generation students recognize and reconcile the many unwritten rules that operate on campus. This study, like the one on graduate students, demonstrates that advisors must understand the extent of the difficulties of transitioning from home to college for first-generation students.

### **First-Generation Latinos at a 2-Year College**

In the final study presented herein, we examined the perspectives of first-generation men from a Latin American background attending a 2-year public college in the Southwest. Although we looked at many aspects of the results, we primarily wanted to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of successful first-generation, first-year college men of Latin American descent. We also wanted to use the knowledge gained to improve retention efforts at institutions with a significant population of Latinos. The knowledge and deeper understanding of this population can be utilized to improve the retention and academic success rates of Latinos at this, or other, institutions.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), the ethnic population of the United States is changing rapidly, with the trend attributable to the growing Latino/a population. Latinas/os are the nation's largest and fastest growing minority group, but the participation and attainment rates of Latinos/as in higher education create concern. Despite the growth and size of this ethnic group, Latinas/os continue to have the lowest educational attainment of all minority groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Latinos graduate high school at a rate of 64%; Latinas graduate at a 61% rate.

These statistics present a troublesome picture because for every 100 Latinas, 108 Latinos live in the United States, which contrasts to the 97 males for every 100 females in the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Furthermore, the Latino population is growing the fastest among all groups, and of the few that attend college, these men likely enroll as first-generation students and choose community colleges as their entry point into higher education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). At the studied college, Latinas/os made up approximately 95% of the enrollments.

### Participants

Participants recruited into this study were first-generation Latinos in the first semester who persisted after the fall drop deadline. Because they remained enrolled through the initial drop period, these students were defined as successful. Forty students agreed to participate in the study. Due to attrition, data were collected through four focus groups consisting of between 4 and 6 students in each group. The students in these focus groups were asked a series of questions designed to identify (a) barriers they overcame, (b) knowledge they gained, and (c) actions they took to persist in college.

### Methods

The discussion in each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Following the focus groups, the students participated in individual follow-up interviews lasting another hour. Eighteen students agreed to participate in the follow-up interviews. The questions asked in these meetings varied because they were based on the themes discovered and topics that interviewed individuals discussed in the focus groups. The items used to guide the focus group interviews are documented in Appendix C.

The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. After listening to the audio tapes and reading the transcripts, Serrata developed and analyzed themes (as per Creswell, 2003), paying special attention to those relating to barriers, knowledge, and actions affecting the persistence of first-generation Latinos.

### Results

Through the interviews, the students identified a number of obstacles to success in college. Three main themes emerged from these reports.

First, students from each of the groups expressed emphatic belief that the transition from high school to college presented barriers for them, explaining difficulties in adjusting to the new setting. As one student described,

So, actually, the first days of school, like you said “the first 12 days of school,” are actually the hardest because you’re adjusting to a whole new setting, and for example, if you have morning classes, that could be a problem. Waking up in the morning to something you’re getting used to is actually quite a bit of a challenge. So is adjusting to a new surrounding—a new setting.

The second theme that emerged relates to financial aid. The college in this study is located among the poorest regions of both the state and the entire country. Although 90% of all students at this college qualify for aid, the focus group students felt that the funds did not sufficiently cover the costs of their education. One student explained:

Actually, money is a barrier. You have to work because financial aid might give you a little money, but it’s nothing compared to what you need to eat, put gas in your car, maintain your house, your car, and all that.

Most students at this 2-year college commute, which made parking and transportation costs particularly big issues for the focus group students. Additionally, the participants reported access to only unreliable cars. The students in one focus group discussed transportation issues as the possible reason many drop out by the second week of fall enrollment. One student hypothesized that some did not have any transportation. Another suggested that lack of cars or other dependable rides created absences. A third student in the group said, “Almost everyone here misses at least one day of transportation.”

One theme from the study on Latino students mirrored that of the studies on graduate students and private-institution undergraduates presented herein: the issue of college–home life balance. Several Latino participants described problems at home due to family members who misunderstand life at college: “You’re the first from your family to go to college—you don’t really know how to start or where to start. You’re just going blind

'cause you really don't know anything." Returning adults with families talked about factoring in child care arrangements and family time when planning their studies; these responsibilities complicated an already stressful transition.

### Summary on Study of Latinos Transitioning to College

Although most in higher education acknowledge a gender gap, some researchers discount the impact of gender differences in receiving education. However, Mead (2006) conceded, "There's no doubt that some groups of boys—particularly Hispanic and Black boys and boys from low-income homes—are in real trouble" (p. 3). When challenges of first-generation college status are added to issues of gender, the odds of Latinos succeeding through college graduation is lowered. Although participants identified a number of college initiatives that may help Latinos in the study, they also shared the same home-to-school transition challenges discussed by other groups featured in this paper.

### Discussion

As the three research studies show, the obstacles for first-generation college students cannot be pushed aside easily, and despite similarities in the findings, the characteristics of this population vary by region and school type. Therefore, the magnitude and complexity of the challenges for both the students and the institutions educating them require extensive, in-depth communication. One overriding conclusion suggests that anyone seeking to make long-term changes must demonstrate to the students, their families, and to the greater society that the intricacies of the problems will not be overlooked, understated, or ignored.

### Family Relationships

Although we conducted the three studies presented in this article with dramatically different populations and settings, one common theme links them all: the difficulty of negotiating family relationships. Chickering and Reisser (1993) argued that student development depends on college students moving through stages of autonomy toward interdependence:

We can say that moving through autonomy toward interdependence involves three components: 1) emotional independence—freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval from

others; 2) instrumental independence—the ability to carry on activities and solve problems in a self-directed manner, and the freedom and confidence to be mobile in order to pursue opportunity or adventure; 3) interdependence—an awareness of one's place in and commitment to the welfare of the larger community (p. 117).

Chickering and Reisser (1993) also maintained that the first step toward emotional independence involves some level of separation from parental involvement. However, this separation forces the student to leave behind old dependencies, which can lead to a grieving process often accompanied by anger. They contended that this transition is further hindered when meaningful people at home fail to support the changes students make. For example, Bobby's reaction to his family's attitude toward him (summed up as "[Bobby] thinks that his stuff don't stink") was, "You know, [that's] a total misinterpretation." At the same time that Bobby appears angry about his family's posture, he also understands it: "In their mind, I abandoned something."

The transition Bobby is experiencing proved difficult for both Bobby and his family. So how does Bobby (and the others in these studies) reconcile his worlds? How do first-generation students negotiate the culture of academia without abandoning the culture in which they came of age? How do advisors help them negotiate this transition to biculturalism?

First-generation students struggling to maintain family ties perhaps face the toughest journey, especially when educators encourage them to demonstrate that they have made meaning of new knowledge and concepts. Making meaning requires students to engage in critical dialogue, but many first-generation students (as these studies show) are denied this opportunity at home. Conversations around the kitchen table about college may end up leaving the student with feelings of disappointment and resentment such as those that Bobby expressed.

In a qualitative study of first-generation females transitioning to college, Nunez (2005) found that the students attempted to redefine their relationships with their families instead of breaking away from them. This finding significantly diverges from the development pathway described by Chickering and Reisser (1993). Nunez (2005) explained the research "suggests that first generation students must traverse a greater social and cultural distance than other

students to become part of the college community and to negotiate a successful passage through college” (p. 88).

### Family Support

London (1992, 1996) similarly found that first-generation college students struggled with competing pressures to stay connected with their families, to fulfill their parents’ wishes by succeeding academically at college, and to continue education without parental support. In the study of students attending private colleges, Liz explained that her mother expressed a belief that college students feel superior to others. According to Liz, her mother thinks college students adopt an attitude of “they’re smarter and they deserve more money.” This belief places Liz in an awkward position because she believes that the purpose of college is to make one smarter and earn more money through a lucrative career. Based on her mother’s reaction to college students, Liz must decide whether (or not) to demonstrate the gained smarts and earned money as a result of her degree and thereby embody the students her own mother disdains. In the process, Liz attempts to integrate her role as a college student into her identity in a way that allows her to maintain her family relationships; she is becoming bicultural.

Nunez (2005) maintained that first-generation students come as members of groups that, traditionally without access to college, face additional pressures due to their increased marginalized status at home. Using the lens of social class, Longwell-Grice (2010) found that for first-generation students (the majority of whom come from working-class and low-income families), the transition to college involves a change in social standing. Longwell-Grice also described first-generation students’ ambivalent feelings about the social class to which they belonged, which show similarity to the emotions of *status incongruity* posited by Sennett and Cobb (1972). Many felt caught between two cultures to the extent that they could not reconcile both sets of expectations. They experienced a disconnect as a result of the upward mobility, fueled by their education, into a higher social class.

In the Torres, Reiser, Lepeau, Davis, and Ruder (2006) study with first-generation Latino students, most Latino/a participants reported that their families support their pursuit of a college degree, but that their parents did not understand their life at college. Although families may offer encouragement and financial support, their inability to

understandably relate to the college experience creates a unique and difficult situation for some students. The Torres et al. study lends further credence to the findings presented in this article about the challenges of first-generation students.

### Implications

#### Advising for Student Belonging

Viewed as the linchpin for students, cultural capital imbues students with the feeling that they belong on the college campus. In explaining cultural capital, Bourdieu (1977) pointed to the advantages of certain groups who share the cultural values of an institution: Many of them feel an immediate sense of belonging because they possess the cultural capital of the dominant groups; however, deficient cultural capital explains problems of students who come from different backgrounds in which they did not accumulate the cultural capital needed to integrate or assimilate into the college setting. Perhaps compounding the problem, programs designed to give students a crash course in the capital they lack further the support for dominant norms and enable use of labels such as *deficient*, *underprepared*, or *at risk*. This use of cultural capital creates outsiders in a way that race theorists criticize as a way to push minorities to the margins and ignore the types of capital they bring to an institution (Yasso, 2005). Despite competing visions for establishing belonging and programs that may or may not instill valuable skills for persistence, advisors can assist first-generation students in their pursuit of a college education.

According to Davis (2010), working effectively with first-generation college students requires a combination of patience and a thorough understanding of the college culture. Many first-generation students come ill-equipped to navigate college because they lack the insider knowledge of the unspoken expectations, specific languages, and hidden rules that students with college-educated parents can leverage. Longwell-Grice and Longwell-Grice (2008) argued that effective retention programs for first-generation students provide not only continuing assistance to students but also assurance of their integration into the academic community. This assimilation helps nullify some of the marginality concerns expressed by Yasso (2005). The general college climate toward student diversity can either support or impair the motivation of first-generation students (Browman & Destin, in press). When they see evidence that people at their university care about them, students



feel more motivated than when they perceive that stakeholders care only for students established within the majority culture. We feel that advising units can establish a climate of support prior to students stepping foot on campus. We feel that advisors would receive an additional opportunity to initiate a strong, trusting relationship by contacting first-generation students before they arrive on campus.

### **Intrusive Advising for Student Persistence**

Research has consistently alluded to a positive influence of advising on student retention (Habley & McClanahan, 2004; Klepfer & Hull, 2012). Furthermore, the number of advisor–advisee meetings may positively affect student persistence (Ishitani, 2006). Vander Schee (2007) also suggested that academic advising affects college student decisions to stay because it offers an effective retention strategy for students considered most at risk for dropping out, including those considered first generation. Because advising appointments may offer one of few institutional mechanisms that consistently connect students to the institution in meaningful ways (Swecker et al., 2013), advisors should embrace every opportunity to use this time in helping students overcome obstacles to their educational goals.

Some policy makers are citing the advising research to implement research programs that include classes, support programs, and living-learning centers. In one intervention for incoming students, panels of first-generation students explain ways they used their unique status as a strength to succeed, and Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) explained that first-generation students who were exposed to these narratives more fully took advantage of college resources and that this behavioral change showed in higher academic performance than demonstrated by those without the benefit of these success stories.

In addition to promoting programs for students, we call on advisors to reflect and remain mindful of their own advising style to ensure that they include all students but find and remain particularly attentive to first-generation students. For example, they may want to incorporate an intrusive advising approach to ensure first-generation students receive assistance and avoid potential crisis situations (Heisserer & Parrett, 2002). Intrusive advising involves deliberate, intensive advising interventions with at-risk students designed to facilitate informed, responsible decision making; increase student involvement in the campus

community; and ensure the probability of the student's academic success. This advising model requires more direct and ongoing contact by advisors than many of the models currently used with students, but may reap the most rewards for first-generation students unfamiliar with the value of advising or who fail to foresee the challenges that may derail them. Through an intrusive approach, the advisor makes intentional contact with students to initiate a caring and beneficial relationship that leads to increased academic motivation and retention (Varney, 2007). Intrusive advising strategies promote the faculty member and advisor relationships that the research suggests benefit students, making this model particularly appropriate for adoption by advisors of first-generation students.

### **Professional Development**

We also strongly recommend that institutions provide support and funding for professional development so that advisors can learn more about the needs of first-generation college students. While many institutional programs offer support for first-generation students, advisors must recognize these students' unique challenges to increase their own comfort when helping students to recognize, deal with, and resolve them. Many first-generation college students turn to their academic advisors, not just for advice on academic matters, but for the guidance needed to navigate campus life on a daily basis (Sickles, 2004), and advisors need to respond appropriately when students seek their assistance.

As higher education continues to offer critical pathways to achieving occupational success and social status, many with increased access value a college education. Therefore, more first-generation students look to earn a college degree. Despite their increased numbers, fewer first-generation college students will graduate from college than their peers whose parents attended college. Advisors serve as the guide, light the path, and help remove obstacles for these transitioning students as they enter college and progress through graduation.

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### Authors' Notes

Rob Longwell-Grice is currently the Director of Recruitment and Scholarship Services for the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee (UWM) and is an adjunct faculty member for the Higher Education Administration program at the university. From 2004 to 2011 he served as the Director of Academic Services for the School of Education where he was responsible for many aspects of academic advising. Rob also served as Associate Dean of Students for the UWM campus previously. Rob has a master's degree in Counselor Education from the Pennsylvania State University and a doctorate in Educational and Counseling Psychology from the University of Louisville. For information about this article, contact him at [robert@uwm.edu](mailto:robert@uwm.edu).

Nicole Zervas Adsitt is currently serving as the Interim Director for the Centers for Student Engagement and Academic Advisement at Cayuga Community College. From 2010 to 2015, she served as the Coordinator of Developmental Studies at Cayuga Community College. Nicole came to Cayuga Community College with work experience in academic support services, the Higher Education Opportunity Program, and the Collegiate Science and Technology Entry Program where she served as a formal and informal academic advisor to many first-generation college students. Nicole earned her bachelor's degree in Speech Language Pathology from Nazareth College and a master's degree in Higher Education Administration from Syracuse University. She is currently a doctoral candidate in the Higher Education Administration program at Syracuse University. She can be reached at [nicole.adsitt@cayuga-cc.edu](mailto:nicole.adsitt@cayuga-cc.edu).

*Kathleen Mullins is a first-generation, community college graduate. After earning her master's degree in English Studies at Western Washington University, she worked for a decade as a writer and project manager in Seattle nonprofit organizations before returning to Western for a master's degree in Higher Education. Her graduate research centered on the experiences of first-generation, working-class students. Today, she combines both degrees in her role as an English faculty member at Front Range Community College in Colorado, where she teaches developmental and transfer-level writing courses and works as a social justice educator dedicated to equity and inclusion for all students. Contact her at [kathy.mullins@frontrange.edu](mailto:kathy.mullins@frontrange.edu).*

*William Serrata was named the President of the El Paso County Community College District effective August 1, 2012. Serrata holds a bachelor's degree from Texas A&M University–College Station, a master's degree from the University of Texas at Brownsville, and a doctorate of philosophy in Educational Human Resource Development from Texas A&M University–College Station. During his career, Dr. Serrata has provided enrollment management leadership in fostering enrollment growth as well as increases in student retention, dual credit enrollment, and graduation rates with an emphasis on first-generation and Hispanic populations and establishing a college-going culture. For more information, contact him at [wserrata@epcc.edu](mailto:wserrata@epcc.edu).*

#### **Appendix A.** First-generation graduate students interview protocol

1. In what discipline did you get your undergraduate degree? From what institution?
2. Tell me about your family's history with education.
3. When did you know you were going to college? Was there someone or something that was particularly influential in that decision-making process?
4. Tell me about your decision to go to grad school.
  - a. How did you feel about your decision?
  - b. When you told your family and friends about your decision, what did they say to you?
  - c. How did you interpret their response(s)? What did it mean to you? How did it affect you?
5. Describe what the first few days of grad school were like.
  - a. Who or what were some of the significant people or events?
  - b. How did you feel like you fit in?
  - c. Tell me about some of the important relationships you've developed in grad school with faculty or staff?
6. What connects you to grad school?
7. If you had to come up with a title that described your experience so far in graduate school, what would it be?
8. Some first generation graduate students describe academia as an "alien culture." Is there anything that feels unfamiliar or alien to you as a graduate student?
9. How do you think your first generation perspective adds to the classroom or your academic work? Where does it trip you up?
10. How conscious are you about being the first in your family to attend college? What does it mean to you?
11. Can you describe if and how being the first in your family to go to college has changed your relationship with your parents or siblings?
12. What advice would you give other first-generation college students preparing to attend graduate school?
13. Now that we've talked about where you've been and where you're at now, what has been the most meaningful part of this conversation for you?
14. Is there anything important you left out?
15. What do you want to remember from this interview?
16. What do you think about my research topic?



**Appendix B.** First-generation undergraduates in private colleges, sample questions

1. What did you first notice when you got to college?
2. What was your preparation for college like?
3. What was high school like?
4. Tell me about your decision to attend college.
5. Tell me about how you decided to attend [current institution].
6. What was it like when you first started college?
7. Tell me about your family.
8. What is it like being the first person in your family to attend college?

**Appendix C.** First-generation Latinos at a 2-year college, initial focus group questions

1. Is this your first semester in college?
2. When did you register for fall classes?
3. Did you encounter any barriers from the point you registered through the fall drop-out date?
4. Describe these barriers.
5. How did you overcome these barriers?
6. Have any of the rest of you faced similar barriers?
7. What percentage of Latino students do you believe encounter such barriers?
8. What knowledge do Latino students need to overcome such barriers?
9. What actions do Latino students need to take to overcome these barriers?
10. What changes could the college make to try and eliminate or minimize these barriers?