

**First-Generation Students: How This Subculture
Chooses Their Higher Education Institution**

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First-generation students are a unique type of student. Both complicated and misunderstood, this subculture provides an increasing challenge for student affairs administrators. Almost 25% of the overall undergraduate population is first-generation, with first-generation being defined as students without parents who went to college (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Misinterpreting, as well as understanding, these students and the reasons they selected their institutions could be crucial to the future understanding and recruiting of this subculture. This subculture, according to Chen and Carroll (2005), is continuously disadvantaged, so anything that student affairs professionals can do to help or understand must be done.

Research Problem

There is currently a lot of interest in first-generation students, so there has already been much research and literature on understanding first-generation students. There is, however, little research on how or why these students choose their higher education institution. This subculture may not have much help or mentorship when choosing their education institution, which could lead to wrong choices, hasty decision making, or the wrong prioritization of contributors. Being that most first-generation students are of the disadvantaged racial, income and gender groups, they are already not receiving the proper secondary education resources, they are definitely not receiving the correct post-secondary mentorship (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Justification of Research Problem

Understanding first-generation students could be the future of recruitment at institutions. Generally, students whose parents or siblings did attend a higher education institution will probably consider that institution in their potential list or idea of institutions to attend. There are,

of course, more factors that go into choosing a college or university, but no one can deny that parental alumni status is a factor, which leaves a large hole for first-generation students. For students whose parents or siblings may not have attended a higher education institution, then the list of universities may dwindle for that student into categories of price or location only. In knowing the factors that drive these decisions, higher education institutions can start making steps towards helping this particular subculture to make those decisions, as well as recruit them.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

There are some deficiencies of evidence to note. Most of the studies done about first-generation students are focused on retention, income and other factors throughout the students' time, rather than before. The questions of how and why must be answered in reference to first-generation students choosing a university so that others can understand the thought process, availability and system of decision-making.

Audience

The audience for this research is fairly simple. This information could be useful to secondary school counselors, as they help guide the students towards universities and ideas. Another beneficiary of this evidence would be the universities and their staff. Institutions can, of course, use this research and information for recruiting students. My ultimate wish for this information is that institutions would utilize it for helping this subculture navigate post-secondary higher education, even after they have chosen an institution.

Literature Review

Nunez (1998) described the traditional first-generation student as “more likely to be older, have lower incomes, be married, and have dependents” (p. 3) versus non-first-generation students. Nunez evaluated the postsecondary outcomes and experiences of first-generation

students in relation to non-first-generation students. She also looked at the differences in demographic, enrollment and aspirational characteristics of the two subcultures (Nunez, 1998). Nunez found that first-generation students are more likely to attend and enroll in postsecondary institutions part-time, as well as attend public 2-year institution and other less-than-4-year institutions. She also noted that some factors, such as socioeconomic status, institution type, first-generation status, had a negative effect on first-generation persistence and attainment of degree (Nunez, 1998).

Influences

Katrevich and Aruguete (2017) studied some of the things that influence first-generation students and their success in the classroom. They evaluated 160 students in a statistics or calculus course at a public institution in the United States. This study had many interesting conclusions. Katrevich and Aruguete concluded that first-generation students scored lower on critical thinking and mathematics grades than their counterparts in the classes. They also found that time and energy for classes, as well as personal contact with faculty members was much lower for the first-generation population than the non-first-generation students (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Lastly, they found that poor academic integration was a major obstacle for these students.

Some very important information about first-generation students is that they have very different backgrounds. One cannot combine all first-generation students into the same bubble. Mehta et al. (2011) specifically studied why first-generation students can fail or fall behind, and thus provided much research on the background of first-generation students. They used a questionnaire and surveyed almost 500 students. These researchers found much valuable information. One of the most important pieces of information that they found was that first-

generation students are typically significantly lower in socioeconomic class and used different sources of funding their education (Mehta et al., 2011). They also found that first-generation students are less likely to use social-coping strategies, such as going to a bar, or social gatherings, which can ultimately hurt how they deal with stress. However, surprisingly, Mehta et al. (2011) found that there was no significant difference in commuter or on-campus living status between first-generation and non-first-generation students.

Somers et al. (2004) conducted a study on first-generation and continuing education in terms of the impact on background, achievement, aspirations, price and college experiences. One of the major finds, but not surprising find, was that for every \$1,000 dollar increase in tuition, first-generation students were 0.0004% less likely to persist with their college degree (Somers et al., 2004). I thought this was an interesting find, as I would have suspected it would have been a higher percentage of first-generation students not persisting with their education.

Transition

Inkelas et al (2007) based their research around the different residential, or non-residential statuses of 1,300 students at over 30 universities and how their residential status helped or hurt the first-generation transition to college. Understanding this variation in success can also help determine why they may have chosen that particular university. Some of their research showed that first-generation students who resided in a living learning community did socially and academically better in their transition to a higher education institution (Inkelas et al., 2007). For first-generation students who did not reside in a living learning community, just a typical or traditional residence hall, and felt their residence hall was socially supportive (in a different way than an LLC might support someone), they found the transition as a first-generation student to be simple and easy (Inkelas et al., 2007).

Although there is a good amount of research on first-generation students, understanding how they choose an institution has seldom been researched. Understanding motivation, success and persistence is easy to research when talking about this subculture, however. In evaluating a first-generation student on any form of success, one must understand all facets surrounding that subculture and understand the ways in which to communicate and support.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to determine the factors that influence first-generation students in determining what higher education institution to attend. There are many research questions to be answered in this study. The first question is how much emphasis first-generation students put on finances, including student loans, grants and scholarships. The second question will be how much attention first-generation students pay attention to majors, degree options and campus resources at a potential institution while making a decision on where to attend. The third question is about how a first-generation student higher education choice is related to family pressure and family ties.

Methods

This study will compare the different factors that first-generation students consider when choosing a higher education institution. First-generation students of any classification, age, ethnicity, or major are eligible to fill out the survey. The survey will take students approximately five to ten minutes to complete and will be optional to withdrawal from at any point. There are about 10 questions to be ranked (see Appendix A). The ranking scale is 1 to 5, with 1 being not considered when choosing an institution and 5 being highly considered. I will be sending the survey out to different subcultures that I have access to, such as the commuter students, post-traditional students, and orientation leaders on campus. These different groups will also help me

understand the differences in how different people who are in different subcultures make decisions. The decisions that first-generation students make in regards to choosing a higher education institution can truly make or break a students' success.

Finances

Finances at a higher education institution are usually very confusing and stressful for all students, but especially first-generation students who may not have a lot of interaction with student loans and scholarships. When taking different higher education institutions into account and considering which to attend, I believe that finances will be the biggest determinant of their choice as a first-generation student. Finances include scholarships, loans, grants, parental help, work study opportunities and more.

The goal of this research is to determine the contributing factors of choices made by first-generation students in choosing a higher education institution. There are many contributing factors to consider, such as finances, location, degrees offered, and more. In understanding the factors that contribute to student decisions, we can better help and understand first-generation students.

Results

In determining the contributing factors to the choices of first-generation students, I surveyed a multitude of student leaders who were first-generation students at Arkansas Tech. This is a valid study because first-generation students are becoming more frequent on campuses across the country and the world. Accessing these students and understanding how they got from point a to point b is crucial for the success of future higher education institutions. This survey was sent to about 65 students across campus of different ages, classifications and genders. Of the

ten who responded, they were a majority female (8 of the 10) and half of the students were sophomores, or second-year students.

Finances

In this research study, finances are an important factor of consideration and, ultimately, the assumption that finances would be the strongest factor. That assumption was correct. There was two separate finance questions, one of scholarships and one of loans and grants. Both averaged the same score of 4.8 out of 5 from the 10 students who participated in the survey. As seen in Figure 1, the loans and grants question was answered by eight of the ten students giving it a 5 in consideration, as well as two students giving it a 4. In Figure 2, it is shown that scholarships were also given the highest consideration with nine of the ten students giving it a 5 ranking. This is important information for a higher education institution to be appealing to incoming first-generation students.

Degrees Offered

Degrees offered was a subject that was, again, assumed to be largely considered. If one thinks about it, people do generally make sure that the institutions they are applying to include the majors or degrees that they are interested in. However, in this case it far exceeded expectations and was the second-highest rated consideration of incoming students. As shown in figure 3, the ten students all gave it a 3 or above, which gave degrees offered an average score of 4.0.

Lower Scoring Research

Of the research questions that were ranked and then scored averagely, two of the lowest questions, so least considered factors, were residence halls and family ties. Residence halls on-campus were only given a 1.8 average rank of the surveyed students. This is particularly

surprising, but not shocking information. Family ties, so grandparent or aunt/uncle alma mater ties, were scored low on consideration at 1.8 also.

Outliers

In the rankings provided, some of the answers had outliers in the data collected. One of the questions that gave an outlier in the data was the ranking of family pressure. As one can see in figure 4, most of the rankings were 1 or 2 in this subject, but student 5 chose a ranking of 5 for family pressure to choose Tech. The other outlier comes from RSOs on-campus. This was also a low-ranking consideration anyway, but there was again a student who ranked this as a 5, while all the others ranked it a 1 to 3 consideration.

This research study provides plenty of information and clarification for future research. It also provides information on how higher education institutions are impacting their own recruiting of first-generation students. If given proper consideration, this study could help both first-generation students and higher education institutions in the future.

Discussion

In doing this study, there were many different unexpected findings that were concluded. By conducting this survey, the intent was to find information and factors that lead to first-generation student decisions in higher education institution choices. Some of my original assumptions were that students would give more consideration to factors such as housing, finances and degree options. The first research question that was to be examined was how much consideration was given to student finances, including loans, scholarships and grants. The second research question to be answered was how much attention first-generation students pay attention to majors, degree options and campus resources at a potential institution while making a decision on where to attend. The third research question was over how a first-generation student higher

education choice is related to family pressure and family ties. These questions were answered to and, the first two, were proved to be highly considered, which was an assumption.

Implications

One of the most surprising implications of this study showed that students do not put a large amount of consideration on housing. I, for one, despised my undergraduate higher education choice housing and chose to live off-campus all three years of attendance. I was surprised to find that first-generation students did not seem to care as much about housing options on-campus when making their higher education choice. However, a choice that was highly considered, as expected, was finances. Loans, grants and scholarships are an associated part of attending a higher education institution in today's world. This research could truly be evaluated from a multitude of angles and ideals.

Limitations

Limitations exist in all studies and this study is no special in that way. There are a multitude of limitations to be considered. First, it is important to note that these were specifically student leaders on a campus in the South. Something to consider in the future would be sending it to all students, regardless of leadership status on campus, as well as location status. I believe that another limitation was the number of respondents. There should be many more respondents in another survey from first-generation students. A large limitation would be the fact that there is no one above the age that participated in this study. Though this is a current research study, it would be interesting to see the contributions and factors that have influenced first-generation students of all ages.

Future Research

There is still a large amount of research that could be done over this study. As mentioned above, this study could be broader in terms of location, but also in terms of socioeconomic status. I think it would be interesting to look at the comparisons of students who come from different socioeconomic backgrounds answer these questions, mostly in terms of finances. Also, in the future I believe it would be beneficial to researchers to find out the differences in ethnicities when answering these research questions. This could provide serious insight to the different Historically Black Colleges and Universities, as well as Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Conclusion

Higher education institution decisions are becoming increasingly hard to make, and meanwhile higher education institutions are getting less and less students. Understanding the decisions that students are making could greatly contribute to higher education institutions staying relevant and a part of society. Though there is further research to be done, this is a great start to understanding the growing subculture of first-generation students and how they make their higher education decisions.

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Appendix A

The survey will consist of the two sections. The first section will consist of demographic information (class standing, gender, first-generation status, and age). The second section will consist of the following factors that students are to rank 1-5 each, with 1 being not considered and 5 being highly considered when choosing Arkansas Tech University:

Scholarships 1 2 3 4 5

Finances (loans & grants available) 1 2 3 4 5

Location 1 2 3 4 5

Family pressure 1 2 3 4 5

Friends collegial choice 1 2 3 4 5

Family ties (grandparents, aunts & uncles) 1 2 3 4 5

Degrees offered 1 2 3 4 5

Faculty and staff at institution 1 2 3 4 5

Residence halls on-campus 1 2 3 4 5

RSOs on-campus 1 2 3 4 5

Resources and establishments on-campus 1 2 3 4 5

Figures

Figure 1

The Influence of Loans and Grants on College Decisions

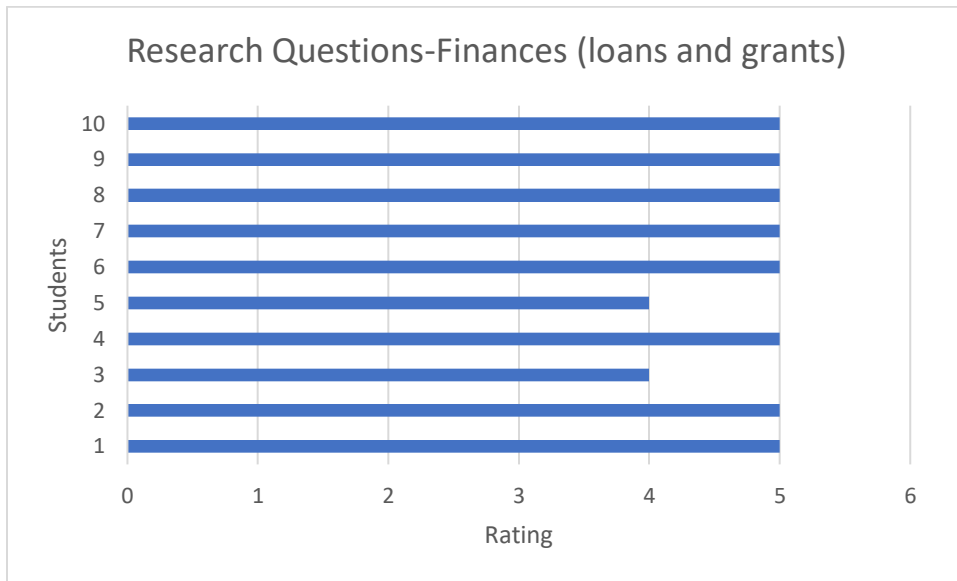


Figure 2

The Influence of Scholarships on College Decisions

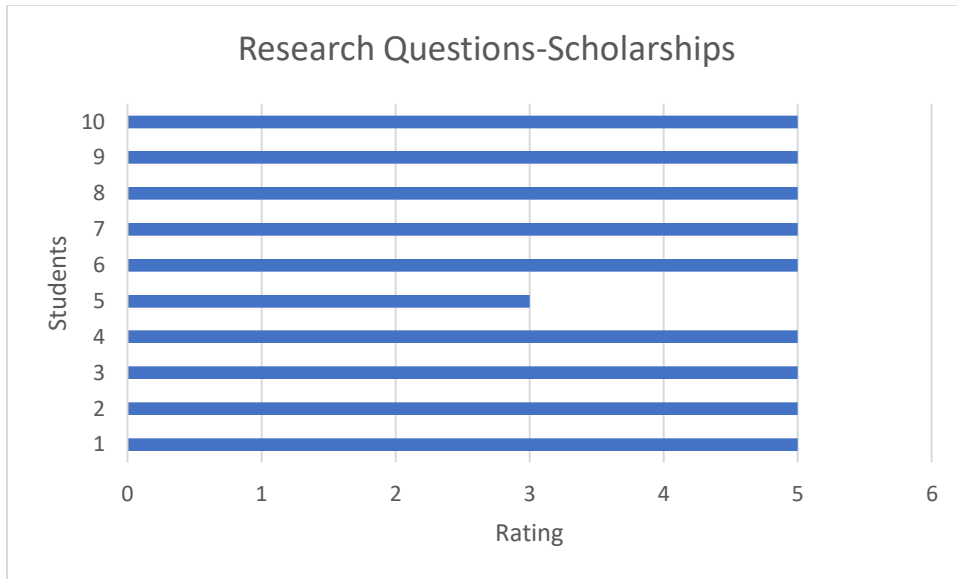


Figure 3

The Influence of Degrees Offered on College Decisions

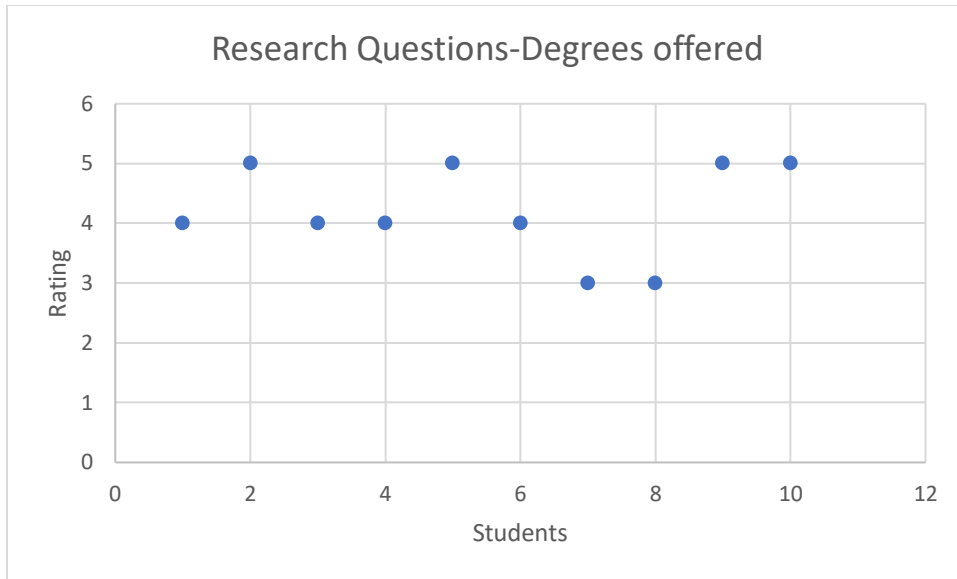


Figure 4

The Influence of Family Pressure on College Decisions

