The Apple Doesn’t Fall Far From the Tree: The Performance of First Generation College Students
First generation college students are a large demographic in higher education. A third of undergraduate students in the United States are considered to be first generation college students (Skomsvold, 2015). With the group being this large, it brings up the urgency to be focused on. For example, due to different upbringings between them and continuing-generation students, how do their problems differ from one another? How are the performance and motivations of first generation college students impacted by their parents? How can the weaknesses of these students be identified in order to retain enrollment? With more and more schools pushing for diversity, it is important to consider how to meet the needs of this group of students in order to ensure their success.

First generation college students are defined in many different ways. For the purpose of this research, first generation students are defined as students whose parents have a high school education or less and do not have a post-secondary education (Ishanti, 2006; Chen, 2005). The majority of all first generation students are minorities. Sixty-one percent of first generation students are Hispanic. Hispanics make up the largest percentage followed by Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander at 50%. Native Americans and African Americans follow with 42% and 41% respectively. Lastly, Asians and Whites make up the smallest demographic at 24% and 23% (U.S Department of Education, 2012). When it comes to major, business and social sciences were the most popular choices for first generation students. First generation students were also more likely to choose a technical field, such as a trade, as opposed to engineering, science, humanities or arts (Chen, 2005).

As a whole, 50% of first generation college students completed their bachelor’s degree within 6 years while 64% of non-first generation students completed their degree within 6 years.
This may be due to the fact that many first generation students come from lower income homes (Nunez, Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al, 1996). The average amount of unmet financial need for first generation students is $6,000, which results in the students working and borrowing more in order to pay back loans. Working while going to school tended to have a negative impact on degree completion because students had to take less credits in a semester and studied fewer hours as well (Terenzini et al, 1996). Not only this, but first generation college students were more likely to attend a 2 year institution, which had lower bachelor’s degree completion rates, compared to those that started at a 4 year institution (Pell Institute, 2008).

**Parental impact on performance**

The education and support of parents has been shown as being an important factor in the success of first generation students. First generation students perceive less family support which can affect them negatively (Terenzini et al., 1996). This is a big issue because first generation students experience more stress when they lack family support. First generation students often feel like they are paving the way, which leads them to feel more pressure and need the support of family (Wang and Castaneda-Sound, 2008). In contrast, continuing-first generation students are impacted positively by their parents' education since they are able to learn from the college experiences of their parents (Giancola, 2008; Brooks-Terry, 1988; York-Anderson & Bowman, 1991). First generation college students do not have the help of family members when it comes to enrolling and managing finances in college, which gives them a disadvantage (Gofen, 2009; Berkner, Horn, & Clune, 2000). Not only this, but parental education also has a direct effect on the education of first generation college students. The U.S Department of Education reported that first generation college students were less prepared than students whose parents obtained a
bachelor’s degree. Around 36% of first generation students took a remedial class within their first two years of college compared to 28% of non-first generation.

**First generation performance vs non-first generation**

One of the biggest differences when it comes to first generation and non-first generation students is their performance. First generation students tend to have a lower average GPA than their non-first generation peers. First generation students often do not receive social support from their universities because of cultural differences. First generation students typically come from backgrounds where individual goals are seen as selfish while continuing-generation students adapt better to university culture due to their personal expectations to meet their goals (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Another important issue is that of involvement. First generation students that participated in extracurricular activities tended to experience positive effects when it came to their plans, critical thinking and stronger control over their success. However, even though this was the case, first generation students were still not as likely to participate due to working while being in school and not living on campus. Furthermore, working more hours tended to lead to negative consequences when it comes to completing their degree because of the negative impact that it has on their critical thinking and their belief of degree completion. In comparison, continuing-generation students that worked experienced an insignificant impact on their critical thinking skills and belief of degree completion. (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004).

**Hispanic performance amongst FGCS**

Hispanic students are most likely to be first generation college students. Aside from being minorities, Hispanic first generation students are also highly likely to come from low-income backgrounds and experience issues such as being unprepared for college (Jenkins, Miyazaki, &
Janosik, 2009). As such, Hispanic students do not perform as well as their peers. For example, Hispanic first generation students are 35.4% less likely to persist from their first to second year in college when compared to white first generation college students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). It is important to note how this minority group’s performance changes with the added variable of parental education. When comparing first generation Hispanic students to non-first generation Hispanic students, it was found that the first generation Hispanics had an average of .32 lower GPA points than the non-first generation Hispanics. Not only this, but Hispanic students from this study that were not first generation had reported a higher income than those who were. Having a higher income positively impacts the performance of the student (Latino, Stegmann, Radunzel, Way, Sanchez, & Casillas, 2018). Further, it was found in a study that the majority of Hispanic students that desired to finish a bachelor’s, master’s or other professional degree in high school did not complete their set goals to do so. By comparison, high school Asian students that set these same goals showed the highest percentages in completing their degrees (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006).

**Hypothesis**

H1. Parental education has a positive impact on GPA.

H2. First generation college students have a lower GPA than continuing education students.

H3. Participating in extracurricular activities has a positive impact on first generation students.

H4. Hispanic first generation students perform lower than the other minority first generation college students.

**Methodology**

**Sample**
Students for the study were recruited from a university in the southern United States. The university has a student population of over 11,000 and is a Hispanic-serving institution. Around half of the students attending are Hispanic and 53% are first generation. Student participants were recruited for the study through an economic class in the college of business. This class was chosen for the study because students of all majors are able to take the course in order to satisfy core curriculum requirements. This would ensure that students of all backgrounds and majors are included in the study. A total of 78 responses were collected.

**Procedures**

Participants in the study were given the survey electronically. Students taking the course were able to complete it by following the link in their Blackboard page. These students were asked various questions regarding their demographics, GPA, extracurriculars, and parental education.

**Work Ethic.** Work ethic was measured using the Protestant Work Ethic Scale (McHoskey, 1994). This scale consisted of 19 questions that asked questions such as: *Most people spend too much time in unprofitable amusements* and *Most people who don’t succeed in life are just plain lazy.* These questions were answered on a 5-point Likert-scale ranging from (1- strongly agree to 5 strongly disagree). The scale has a reliability of .81.

**Parental Influence.** Parental influence was measured using the Perceived Parental Influence scale (Cao et al., 2007). This scale consisted of 8 questions about a mother’s influence on education and 8 questions about a father’s influence on education. This scale had a reliability of .876. Questions like the following were asked: *My mother expects me to be the best student I can be* and *My father asks me about my grades regularly.*

**Data**
No significant results were found.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine first generation college students and how their parents impact their education and work ethic. This subject matter has been examined very closely due to the fact that first generation student enrollment has been steadily climbing throughout the years. According to research, parents impact student performance through a number of factors such as support, income and education level (Gayle, Golan & Sotas, 2018). This research project did not find any significant effects between parents and their impact on first generation students and that could be due to numerous reasons.

One factor that may have impacted this study is students becoming independent once they begin college. In college, students typically gain more freedom. This means that students are also free from the expectations and pressures of their parents (Lowe & Dotterer, 2017). Students in high school typically live with parents and have them to encourage them to do well in school. Parents also communicate with faculty and staff, which also shows how involved they are. The opposite could have been the case in this situation. Since students are more independent in college, this means that they are accountable for their own performance. Students also gain maturity and learn to be more responsible when it comes to deadlines. Not only this, but many college students learn to make connections in order to apply for internships and positions in their communities (Covarrubias, Valle, Laiduc & Azmitia, 2019). This shows that their independence also reaches beyond their academic career.

Another factor that may come into play is student peers. Peers have also been shown to have an effect on education and GPA. Social connections that students make during extracurricular activities have been proven to aid them in their educational futures. Furthermore,
it has been shown that who is in the extracurricular has more of an effect than what the actual extracurricular is (Gibbs, Erickson, Dufur & Miles, 2015). Peers have the power to influence students because of the fact that students do not rely so much on their parents in college. Who students surround themselves with may ultimately impact their education and motivations.

Lastly, Hispanic Serving Institutions have the ability to impact Hispanic students positively. Institutions like these tend to support students by offering more resources and this in turn leads to more engagement when compared to non-Hispanic Serving Institutions (Nelson Laird et al., 2007). Studies also largely focus on the completion of STEM degrees by Hispanic students. Research has shown that 54% of Latino STEM graduates attended Hispanic Serving Institutions (Harmon, 2012). Hispanic Serving Institutions realize that they have a large population of students that may be first generation or come from low income households, so they initiate programs, such as TRIO, in order to ensure the success of these students. Since Hispanic Serving Institutions have strong support systems, this could help students adjust to college and no longer feel impacted by their parents.

**Practical Implications**

Because of the ever growing first generation student population, colleges need to consider many things. First, what kind of support do they offer students? Higher institutions should be placing more thought into the types of clubs or activities offered. Having organizations geared to the success of minority and first generation students could ensure their progression throughout college. Not only this, but much importance should be placed on the types of opportunities that are available for them. If students get the chance to intern or gain experience in college, it could lead to them seeing the bigger picture and push them to continue. Being able to have a supportive college or university could be the difference in a student succeeding or failing.
Since there were no significant results found, this could also mean that first generation students do not differ much from their non-first generation counterparts. There may not be differences in their dedication and capability, which would mean that progress is being made to better serve this population. There are many factors that could have affected these results, such as the fact that the Hispanic population at the chosen school was so large. Perhaps having a larger population of Hispanics leads to larger support throughout the community.

**Limitations and Future Research**

This study had some limitations. The first limitation is the sample size. This study received a total of 78 responses, which is small compared to other studies. When wanting to obtain information about student populations, it is important to have a large sample so that students of all backgrounds are included. In future research, it would be beneficial to distribute more surveys throughout campus and even including more than one campus. This would give researchers more data that may lead to conclusive results.

Another limitation is that students were only surveyed in one class. The students in this study were given surveys in a lower level economics course. Though this course is available for all majors, including an array of courses could have given different sets of data. Including multiple classes could benefit future researchers because it would have an even more diverse set of students because of college major. Having more majors represented could impact a number of measures such as GPA, extracurricular activities and campus involvement.

**Conclusion**

Education is an opportunity and privilege that should be extended to learners of all backgrounds. First generation students are applying to college now more than ever before. In order for this population of students to succeed, much research has to be done on what impacts
their education and what can be done so that they excel in their school work. Students in this
demographic need to be supported so that they remain motivated and may reach their ultimate
goal of graduating from college.


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