



Understanding and Supporting the Learning Process for First Generation College Students at CSUN

1. Interventions aimed at benefitting First Generation College Students (FGCS) are likely to benefit the general student population.

- Increased benefits if interventions are administered early (esp. within the first 2 years).
- Effective strategies help students develop a sense of self-competence (Thayer, 2000).

2. First Generation College Students are a growing and distinctive constituency at CSUN.

According to CIRP Freshman Survey Report, Fall 2007 Class (Huber & Naganand, 2008):

- 55% were FGCS broadly defined (parents completed some college, no degree)
- 31% were FGCS narrowly defined (parents only completed high school)

First Year FGCS at CSUN are more likely to differ from other students in their background:

- High proportion emerge from Latina/o origins
- Almost half (48%) report English was their second language
- 74% report parents income is less than \$50,000 per year, compared to 29% of Non-FGCS
- Two-thirds of FGCS grew up in diverse (Non-White) neighborhoods
- Were more likely to attend diverse public schools

FGCS Academic Background

- Similarly to Non-FGCS reported earning B grades in HS, took more AP courses
- A little more likely to expect remediation (especially in writing)

FGCS Family Supports and Finances

- Report parents were insufficiently involved in multiple aspects of the college admissions process (choice of college courses, college activities, decision to apply)
- 81% express concerns about ability to pay for college, greater reliance on fin. aid

FGCS Self-Perceptions

- Less likely than NFGCS to see themselves as “outstanding” on intellectual traits (creativity, academic ability, writing ability, artistic ability)

*Keep in mind that non-freshman FGCS students, who may enter the university as transfer students, and even graduate students may reflect these trends

FGCS Nationally: (Engle, et al., 2008)

- More likely to leave college after the first year than Non-FGCS (26%:7%). After 6 years only 11% had earned a bachelor degree, in comparison to Non-FGCS peers (55%)
- May experience overwhelm, intimidation, stress, decreased academic confidence, and doubts over their abilities (Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Padron, 1992)

3. Students' self-perceptions and academic confidence can be changed and improved.

- Understanding the components of self-confidence enables us to help students grow in their perceptions of themselves
- What builds student's self-confidence?
 1. Task Performance: How and what she/he has done in the past
 2. The experiences of peers: "My friend did it, so can I"
 3. Verbal Persuasion: "I believe in your ability to succeed"
 4. Physiological Reactions: High Stress & Anxiety sabotage confidence. Confidence is higher in relaxed alert states.
- Self-confidence is what students make of all these sources. All of this information combines to form their beliefs or judgments of their own ability to succeed on a task
- Students benefit from having a balanced perception of their strengths, weaknesses, supports, and struggles
- A "growth mindset" is essential to success. Help students believe they can grow their smarts and skills, to see that mistakes and failures are learning steps

4. Recognize the key role of parental support.

- Perception of parental support is a predictor of retention and success (Thayer, 2002)
- Distinctions between expressed support and actual support
- Struggles may ensue when parental support may be unintentionally critical, uninformed, invalidating, or may be perceived as pressure by the student.
- Don't underestimate the student's commitment to their family role. Initially, it may be difficult for them to hear they need to "focus on their needs" to "focus on school."
- FGCS students, like all students, will benefit from learning to communicate and negotiate their needs in their family

5. Familiarize yourself with phenomena often experienced by FGCS

- Strengths
 1. Express strong desire to accomplish degree goals
 2. Express high levels of commitment to earn a degree
 3. Show resilience in family and communities
 4. May see the collective value of earning a college degree
- Struggles
 1. I have to work twice as hard!
 2. The Impostor Syndrome
 3. Feeling different/deficient

4. Feeling torn between school and home life (alone)

6. Consider a student's level of acculturation to the academic environment

- Universities are systems, which may be drastically different from previous schooling
- Individuals are entering these systems without readily available role models or guides
- "College requires a cultural journey to a very different land than the one they knew... Surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average" (Oldfield, 2007).

7. Employ existing opportunities to introduce your students to the expectations and activities of your classroom

- Orientation to your teaching approach and assignments helps students understand the culture and expectations of your class
- If possible use checklists or rubrics to orient students
- Collaborative classroom interaction to increase FGCS exposure to peers

8. Promote help-seeking as an essential strategy for adapting and succeeding in college

- Pioneer, independent students may perceive needing help as a sign of "weakness"
- Effective interventions help students understand their success is not obtained by individual achievement alone but by an axis of support (Gullat & Jan, 2003)
- Promote help-seeking as a component of assignments (e.g., papers) or as extra credit
- Include information on the Learning Resource Center, University Counseling Services, and the Center on Disabilities in the class syllabus.

9. Practice giving constructive feedback

- Balanced feedback that builds on student's existing strengths
- If possible separate the problematic behavior from the person
- Be aware of the power of expectations

10. Encourage students to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning

- Student's motivation benefits from seeing the connection between their classes and their life goals
- Help students recognize when they engage in compensatory behaviors to save face.
- -When students are afraid of failing or have a hard time seeing their role in their own struggles they may blame the class, the book, the subject, even the professor
- Encourage students to set goals for their own learning
- Help students understand that despite the multiple barriers or struggles, they have choices in how they spend their time and resources.
- Encourage them to give themselves a fair chance at learning and growing!

Selected References

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