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# In Search of the Possible Dream: Attributes of First Generation College Students Contributing to Their Completion of a Baccalaureate Degree



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## Introduction

First generation college students, those students whose parents have no post-secondary, baccalaureate degree, face many obstacles in the journey to completion of a baccalaureate degree. Among these obstacles are:

- ❖ They are not as well prepared academically as students whose parents attended college and may not have developed the study and analytical skills in high school that would have prepared them for college.
- ❖ They may lack the support from family members who are unfamiliar with the college experience so have difficulty finding and negotiating financial information, finding and making informed decisions about the selection process, and the general academic expectations required in college → lacking in cultural capital.
- ❖ Many hold full-time jobs to cover their college and living costs and often to support their families so that when a conflict arises, they often put work over their studies and experience a great deal of stress when needed to resolve the issues of school and work.



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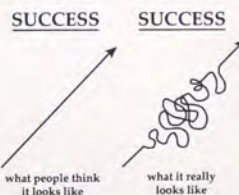
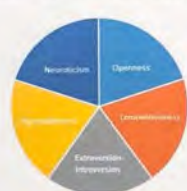
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## Findings

- ❖ Conscientiousness has been found to correlate positively to different academic outcomes, such as essays, examinations, and other assessments, most likely due to the responsible, hard-working, industrious, and motivated nature of highly conscientious individuals, who focus on organization, care in work, efficiency, thoroughness, and dependability. Moreover, highly conscientious individuals are typically achievement-oriented and look to being successful in their education, as measured by high grades, and, even enrollment in honors and advanced courses.
- ❖ Motivation are those forces within an individual and include self-efficacy, academic self-concept, and academic self-confidence.
- ❖ Self-efficacy is a key component of people's activities and is related to their beliefs about their capabilities to learn or to perform. Students who display high levels of self-efficacy tend to set higher aspirations and goals for themselves and achieve greater performance, resulting in a strong relationship between self-direction and performance.
- ❖ Academic self-concept measures students' beliefs about their abilities and confidence in an academic environment. Students who believe in their academic ability, have the drive to achieve, and display intellectual self-confidence are more likely to persist while those who lack confidence in their academic preparation are more likely to decide to leave their academic institutions.



- ❖ Self-worth is based on the idea that people are motivated to establish and maintain a positive self-concept or image. Self-worth assumes that students search for self-acceptance and, academically, self-acceptance depends on one's ability to achieve and succeed. It is determined by an individual's own perception of one's ability, a perception which is mainly tied to successful achievement. Students who have a strong academic self-worth tend to have the motivation that drives them to attain academic excellence. Students who believe in themselves and their abilities will feel successful in their academic pursuits, which, in turn, reinforces the desire to persist and reach that goal of a baccalaureate degree.
- ❖ Parental support and encouragement can be a great influence on the ability to graduate from college when parents know and understand the value of education in general. First generation college students whose parents attended only high school or may not have completed high school may want for their children what was not possible for them and assume that their children will attend college.
- ❖ Self-reliance and independence. Independence can manifest itself both in students' independence from family but also independence from peers—learning how to make personal choices that allow them to meet academic requirements. Often peers can detract students from taking optimal scholastic action; however, having a sense of personal independence empowers students to deflect disadvantageous peer pressure and take action that will serve them well and navigate the unknown territory of the college experience.
- ❖ Grit is a characteristic of an individual who has perseverance, determination, and passion for long-term goals. Someone who demonstrates grit works strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest and staying on course, regardless of disappointment, failure or adversity.
- ❖ Optimism—the dispositional tendency to be generally positive even under adversity or difficult situations—can contribute not only to higher levels of psychological and physical well-being and lower levels of psychological stress, but to maintaining positive expectations of college life and the desire to remain in college. Optimism, along with hope and resiliency, serves to create positive psychological capital which can help first generation college students to navigate their college experience and work to persist to degree completion. The ability to be optimistic and remain positive despite the many obstacles that can be encountered by students in their college years can be used to their benefit in both personal and academic settings.



## Conclusions

Many different types of programs such as academic advising, tutoring, mentoring, peer instruction, and small learning group communities have been found to be successful in engaging and retaining first generation college students. However, these programs are external to these students and come from the institutional environment, and are only as good in helping students to succeed as long the students are willing and ready to take advantage of them.

Consequently, these external influences do not address those characteristics and personality traits that can come from within these students that enable them to succeed and ensure their completion of a four-year degree. Certain first generation college students bring to their higher education settings specific attributes and personal assets that help to explain their ability to persist. Motivated by feelings of high self-efficacy, self-worth, and self-reliance, these students are optimistic, independent, and able to recognize their inner strengths, and in so doing, achieve higher academic performance.

Colleges and universities would be well advised to identify the personal attributes and assets of those first generation college students who are more likely to persist and graduate. These students are the ones who are truly motivated and will more likely take advantage of academic services in order to reach their goal of obtaining a four-year degree. In turn, the retention rate of colleges and universities with high percentages of first generation college students would improve and turnover in the student body would be decreased. It may be time that colleges and universities look less towards special programs and academic support services and more towards identifying those students with those attributes that come from within themselves that will enable them to receive a baccalaureate degree.

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