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

Jackie Masloff
Doctoral Student, Educational Studies
Dedham, Massachusetts

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 aid, determining and making informed decisions about the selection process, and the general academic expectations required in college.
- Many hold full-time jobs to cover their college and living costs and often support their families 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.

Findings
- Grit—perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Someone who demonstrates grit works strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest and staying on despite disappointment, failure or adversity.
- Self-faith 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 persevere while those who lack confidence in their academic preparation are more likely to decide to leave their academic institutions.

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. These programs are external to these students and come from the institutional environment, and are only as good as helping students to succeed as long the students are willing and ready to take advantage of them.
- Consequently, 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-work, and self-esteem, these students are optimistic, independent, and able to recognize their inner strengths and, in so doing, achieve higher academic performance.

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References