

Shifting Elitist Perspectives in Higher Education: First Generation Students' Access.

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

First-generation college students (FGCS) are increasing across US universities. The surge in enrollment is mainly due to colleges' efforts and initiatives to improve access, retention, and holistic development on their campuses. This paper uses Astin's (1984) inputs-environment-outcomes theoretical framework to examine how four Midwestern United States universities challenge elitist views in higher education by promoting FGCS success. A preliminary look at the universities' policy documents indicates that many programs have been instituted for FGCS and have impacted their success.

Full paper

INTRODUCTION

First-generation college students (FGCS) without parental four-year degrees face academic, financial, psychological, cultural, and social barriers (Stephens et al., 2014; Pascarella et al., 2004; Green & Wright, 2017). They often experience self-doubt and a cultural mismatch between interdependent values and institutional middle-class norms. Universities address these through programs offering mentoring, peer networks, and transitional support, fostering community and belonging. Faculty and staff act as institutional agents, bridging gaps by providing social capital and navigating opaque higher education systems. Despite this, there remains a prevailing narrative that higher education fosters elitism. This paper investigates how universities challenge elitist views in higher education by promoting FGCS success.

Literature Review

First-generation students are "college students who do not have parents with 4-year college degrees" (Stephens et al., 2014, p.943). FGCS faces multiple interrelated obstacles. Structural barriers include socioeconomic disadvantages, weaker academic preparation, and limited family college knowledge, forcing many FGCS to borrow heavily to attend

college. Cultural barriers also emerge: FGCS often hold more interdependent, communal values than the independence prized by universities, a cultural mismatch that reduces academic performance. FGCS typically have less traditional college cultural capital, although community cultural wealth frameworks emphasize their familial and aspirational resources. Social capital deficits mean FGCS often lack dense college-going networks, making institutional agents crucial: one study found frequent faculty contact strongly predicted higher GPA and engagement. Financial constraints compound these significant challenges: FGCS rely disproportionately on loans and need-based aid (47% plan to use grants vs 6% of peers and often enroll first at two-year colleges (Engle & Tinto, 2008), limiting bachelor's attainment. According to social-cognitive theory, lower FGCS self-efficacy and outcome expectations further dampen their enrollment and persistence. These findings support policies like stronger college advising, expanded targeted aid and mentoring, and culturally inclusive interventions to improve FGCS outcomes, helping close attainment gaps.

Research question

1. How do institutional policies and practices on FGCS challenge elitist views on access to higher education?

Objective of the Study

This study explores policies and support programs in four Midwestern institutions in the US that promote the success of first-generation college students (FGCS). It examines how these efforts address FGCS's academic, social, and financial challenges and whether they disrupt or reinforce elitist narratives in higher education. By analyzing these dynamics, the study seeks to contribute to reimagining higher education as a more just, accessible, and affirming space for students from historically underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds.

Significance of the Study

This study challenges dominant ideologies that frame higher education as elitist by centering the experiences of first-generation college students (FGCS). It examines how institutional structures and support programs resist reproducing social inequities and function as acts of social justice. By highlighting practices that foster access, belonging, and success for students without inherited cultural or social capital, the study contributes to equity-focused discourse in higher education. Its findings aim to inform policymakers, educators, and student affairs professionals about the importance of inclusive environments that build on FGCS's strengths. Ultimately, the study advocates for a more democratic vision of higher education that disrupts elitist norms and affirms all students' diverse identities and contributions.

Theoretical Framework

Astin's (1984) inputs-environment-outcomes (IEO) theoretical framework is designed to promote policies and practices that aim at supporting college student success (Bowman, 2025). The model examines how college contexts and environments interact and impact student success (Bowman, 2025). The inputs consider characteristics that students bring into college, the environment examines what they encounter in college, and outcomes are about student achievement goals (Bowman, 2025). In this research, we use Astin's inputs-environment-outcomes (IEO) to delve into first-generation students' pre-college experiences, college support systems, and success on campus.

Data Sources/ Analysis

The study uses secondary data from institutional websites, policy documents, and publicly available reports on FGCS support in four midwestern colleges. Using the IEO theoretical framework, content analysis would be used to identify similar patterns of FGCS activities and practices. These college programs and support would be coded, and themes generated. To promote inter-reliability of the data, the research team would code separately, discuss and agree on identified codes, and suggest themes that would be used to analyze the data.

Conclusion

A preliminary look at the universities' policy documents indicates that many programs have been instituted for FGCS and have impacted their success. Their increasing number on these campuses shifts the elitist perspectives of the higher education landscape.