



Research Brief

## First Generation Students – Status Quo is not Enough

By Robert Longwell-Grice, Ed.D.

### Challenges for First-Generation College Students

Typically first-generation students who pursue college degrees undergo enormous transformations as they negotiate the difficult transition into the culture of academia. In addition to confronting the anxieties, dislocations, and difficulties that most college students face, their experiences often involve cultural, social and academic transitions (Rendon, 1996; Pascarella, Wolniak, Pierson & Terenzini, 2004). According to the United States Department of Education, 43% of students attending post-secondary institutions in the United States are first-generation students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). There is a consensus that these numbers will continue to grow as a college degree becomes necessary for more entry-level jobs (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

Compared to students with college-educated parents, first-generation college students:

- receive less assistance in preparing for college
- feel less supported in attending college
- lack a sense of belonging to the college they attend (Choy, 2001)

All of these factors impact recruitment and retention of students from these working-class backgrounds, and make the transition to college particularly challenging (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Of particular importance in addressing these risk-factors is the relationship that is established between students and faculty.

This brief is the first in a series that will highlight important research on student success

## The Impact of Student-Faculty Relationships

According to Vincent Tinto (1990), students must be sufficiently involved on the college campus if an institution is to successfully retain its students. Further, Tinto asserts that students are more likely to stay in schools that involve them as valued members of the institution, Tinto says, the frequency and quality of contact with faculty, staff and other students is a key component to student satisfaction.

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Tinto (1990) maintains that the research regarding drop-out rates for students in general is quite clear in demonstrating that both the quantity and the quality of faculty-student interaction (especially outside the classroom) is the single strongest predictor of whether or not a student will stay in college or drop out of college.

Although Tinto argues that all students benefit from interaction with faculty, some students find this type of interaction more uncomfortable than others. Indeed, a case study conducted among first generation, working class college students suggests that first-generation, working-class students see interacting with faculty as something that is fraught with dangers, not rewards (Longwell-Grice, 2003; 2008).

## First-Generation Students' Fear of Faculty-Interaction

One of the students in this study named Patrick was very articulate about the intricacies and impact of faculty-student interactions. His words illuminated five aspects of interactions between faculty and working-class students:

1. cultural expectations
2. family experience
3. the gatekeeper role of faculty
4. perceptions of uncaring faculty
5. academic insecurities

*As (my parents) see it, the college will tell you your classes, and where you live, and where to get your food, and they will provide you with the basic things. But everything else is yours to figure out. Mom and Dad say that they cannot do it. They say, "No one can do this except for you." People who have been through college say, "We think the university needs to do this, and do that." People, who have people to guide them, who have people who have been through college, seem to be the ones that complain the most. But people like us, we don't. Our parents instilled in us that it is our job, and not anyone else's, to look after us up to this point. They've gotten us this far, "Let's throw 'em out there and see how they do."*

Patrick's words create an image of a young adult with very different expectations from non-first-generation students. He believed that the college had little or no obligation to support him in his efforts and it was entirely up to him to succeed. He could not look back to his parents for support, and he did not expect help from his college community. Patrick believed that he should be strong enough and smart enough to figure out college by and for himself. While feeling a sense of pride in being self-reliant, he was actually severely disadvantaged by refusing to access support services that would greatly increase his chances of being successful.

Patrick viewed faculty members as gatekeepers, whose purpose was to ensure that students were serious about college. He thought they were more than indifferent; they purposefully set up roadblocks to test students. Patrick felt these roadblocks were put in place to test his resolve.

Patrick felt like he needed a specific reason to contact his faculty members, and was reluctant to visit faculty outside of class:

*People who know say, "You need to go talk to the professor." Maybe people who have had that teacher, or who has been through this college experience, know. It helps to have someone who not only went to college, but who actually made it through. And he'll say, "Hey, if you have a problem, there is no other way." So, then, you go talk to your professor. When I go to class, that is our time. It is time for us students. And outside of that it just seems weird and I don't want to bug them. I just have this idea in my head that if I do go to their office, they are going to harangue me. They will say, "What are you doing here? You are a failure. Get out of here. What do you want?" And that is not something that I want to hear. And that is a big reason for me not to see them.*

Patrick was hesitant to visit faculty outside of the classroom because he was afraid that of negative ramifications. Patrick did not feel worthy of faculty attention and feared retaliation for seeking help without a good enough reason. So, armed with the assumption that faculty were going to be hostile unless he had a good reason to bother them, and feeling unworthy of scheduling meeting time outside of class, he would most likely not schedule faculty office hours without either a mandatory meeting requirement or encouragement from a trusted faculty member.

The Longwell-Grice study concluded that the combination of a lack of security in their identities as potentially successful college students and the belief that faculty lacked genuine concern, resulted in giving these students the impression that they would be better off remaining anonymous. As long as they remained at arm's length with the faculty, they were safe and wouldn't be discovered. If they took a chance in making themselves known to the faculty, they ran the risk that faculty would identify their weaknesses and reject them as failures.

The fact that the students in Longwell-Grice's study frequently referenced their perception of faculty supports Tinto's contention that faculty relationships are important to students. Since research has shown that faculty interaction is critical to student retention and that first-generation, working-class students are at substantial risk for dropping out, the challenge is clear - how do college communities encourage first-generation students to overcome their reluctance and/or fear to seek out their faculty?

Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch (1995) found that success within the educational system for working-class students is dependent upon the formation of genuinely supportive relationships with faculty mentors. They found, however, that these supportive relationships were difficult to find and maintain.

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As a first step towards building these faculty-student relationships, faculty and academic advisors need to engage in a process of proactive (intrusive) advising for first generation students (and other at-risk students) which should include mandatory meetings with faculty and advising staff. While this approach would most certainly benefit first-generation, working-class college students, ultimately all college students would benefit from some level of required faculty interaction.

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## About the Author



Robert Longwell-Grice is the director of academic services for the school of education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. He received his masters degree in counselor education from Pennsylvania State University, and his doctorate in educational and counseling psychology from the University of Louisville. His research interests include first generation students and issues of social class on the college campus.

## About Starfish Retention Solutions

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