

Comparative Experiences of First Generation and Continuing Generation Social Work Students

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Background & Purpose

In the present era of institutional accountability, baccalaureate programs have become more responsive in improving persistence and degree completion rates for minority and other historically underrepresented student groups. Particular attention has been given to first-generation college students. First-generation college students are those whom neither parent attended nor graduated from a baccalaureate institution (Billson & Terry, 1982). They are ethnically diverse; with 40 percent reflecting African American, Hispanic, or another ethnic heritage (Strand, 2013). Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) noted that first-generation students are more likely to be female, married, or have children. Several other studies characterized them as being less prepared for the demands of college coursework (Bui, 2002), more likely to work during college, and as socioeconomically disadvantaged (London, 1989; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Riehl, 1994). Compared to their continuing generation counterparts, first-generation students experience more difficulties negotiating their academic environment, are less likely to persist toward graduation (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010), and are more likely to drop out after the first year of college (Hodges, 2000).

First-generation college students from racial minority backgrounds are overrepresented in undergraduate social work programs (Council on Social Work, Education, 1997). This disproportion presents an opportunity for social work programs to address attrition and other challenges this group faces in pursuing bachelor degrees in social work. The Council on Social Work Education endorses this opportunity. The 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) contains an important provision requiring accredited social work programs to implement strategies for enhancing academic outcomes for diverse student populations (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.). For this reason, program faculty are in unique positions to address attrition, improve academic experiences, and bridge the achievement disparity between first-generation and continuing generation students. Notwithstanding faculty potential for developing practices that enhance degree attainment outcomes, the shortage of research information limits them from gleaning content specific to combatting attrition and addressing their needs (Hodges, 2000).

Research Questions

This research study sought to further our understanding of first generation students in social work by addressing the following questions:

- 1) Does first generation student status predict reasons for going to college, stress in college, confidence in college, and knowledge of student services controlling for other variables?
- 2) Does first generation student status predict cumulative GPA and likelihood of attending graduate school controlling for other variables?

Comparison of First Generation and Continuing Generation Students

	First Gen. Mean (%) n=100	Cont. Gen. Mean (%) n=56	Total N=156	F (X ²)
Race				
African-Amer.	(75.0)	(46.4)	(64.7)	(14.75)**
White	(17.0)	(44.6)	(26.9)	
Gender (%)	(91.0)	(94.6)	(92.3)	(.67)
female)				
Age	2.99	2.80	2.92	.48
Year in School	3.27	3.21	3.25	.12
Cum. credit				
hours	93.36	89.80	92.08	.32
Hours worked	30.33	27.64	29.37	.97
Hardships	2.46	1.70	2.19	3.78*
Independ.	9.22	8.76	9.06	3.36
reasons				
Interdep.	9.12	8.23	8.80	11.01***
reasons				
Stress	4.94	4.44	4.76	2.09
Confidence	6.51	6.96	6.67	2.07
Know. Student	5.88	5.21	5.64	3.22
Servs.				
Cum. GPA	2.44	2.36	2.41	.22
Pursue MSW	5.72	6.25	5.91	4.90*
Pursue Other	5.26	4.79	5.09	2.46
Grad				

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Methods & Data Analysis

One hundred and fifty-six undergraduate social work majors participated in this study. The sample of social work students were surveyed about their demographics including parents' highest level of education, grade point average, number of credit hours taken, stress and confidence related to college, independent and interdependent reasons for going to college, intention to pursue graduate education, use of student support services, and financial hardships. Missing value analysis was used to estimate missing responses for continuous variables. Chi-square tests and MANOVA were used to examine the relationship between first generation student status and other variables. Cronbach's alpha tests were used to examine the internal consistency of the following scales: independent reasons for going to college, interdependent reasons for going to college, stress related to college, confidence related to college, and knowledge of student services. Finally, two multivariate analysis of covariances (MANCOVA) were used to address the research questions.

Results

Comparing first generation and continuing generation students, first generation students were found to experience more hardships, endorse more interdependent reasons for going to college, and be less likely to plan to pursue an MSW after their program. A MANCOVA indicated that first generation students were more likely to endorse interdependent reasons for going to college and experience more stress. MANCOVA indicated that there was no relationship between first generation student status and GPA, likelihood to pursue an MSW, or likelihood to pursue another graduate degree.

Additional findings include that African American students were more likely to endorse interdependent reasons for going to college. Students who were more confident were more likely to say they intended to pursue an MSW, and students who were more stressed were more likely to say they intended to pursue another graduate degree.

Results of MANCOVA predicting Reasons for College Attendance, Stress, Confidence, and Student Services									
	Independ. Reasons		Interdep. Reasons		Confidence		Stress		Student Services
	F	Part. η ²	F	Part. η ²	F	Part. η ²	F	Part. η ²	
Model	1.66	.08	4.43***	.20	3.20**	.148	3.45***	.16	6.32***
Intercept	233.4***	.61	232.1***	.61	.73.5***	.33	253.1***	.31	25.99***
First Generation	1.33	.01	4.55*	.03	1.71	.01	5.22*	.03	.32
Gender	3.88*	.03	3.31	.02	1.21	.01	1.56	.01	.03
Age	.25	>.01	.72	.01	.05	>.01	.39	>.01	11.06***
Race	2.70	.04	9.48***	.11	2.10	.03	6.87***	.09	12.01***
Hours Worked	.28	>.01	.07	>.01	2.37	.02	3.59	.02	5.59*
Year in School (class)	.08	>.01	.56	>.01	5.13*	.03	1.85	.01	9.27**
Hardships Experienced	>.01	>.01	.19	>.01	6.27*	.04	1.87	.01	9.27**

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Results of MANCOVA predicting Grade Point Average and Graduate School Attendance

	GPA		Pursue MSW		Pursue Other Grad.	
	F	Part. η ²	F	Part. η ²	F	Part. η ²
Model	2.74**	.20	1.21	.10	1.89*	.15
Intercept	1.31	.01	30.74***	.18	15.64***	.10
First Generation	.69	.01	1.11	.01	2.27	.02
Gender	.80	.01	1.30	.01	2.52	.02
Age	4.28*	.03	.85	.01	.84	.01
Race	.06	>.01	.43	.01	.98	.01
Hours Worked	.44	>.01	.20	>.01	>.01	>.01
Year in School (class)	11.89***	.08	.24	>.01	.63	>.01
Hardships Experienced	.18	>.01	.08	>.01	.68	.01
Independent Reasons	.01	>.01	.01	>.01	3.99	.03
Interdependent Reasons	2.21	.02	.88	.01	2.07	.01
Confidence	4.02*	.03	4.93*	.03	.01	>.01
Stress	2.71	.02	.02	>.01	5.70*	.04
Student Services Know.	1.30	.01	2.11	.02	.73	.01

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

Discussion & Implications

First generation students differ from continuing education students in terms of their motivations for attending college and experiences while enrolled. Because first generation and African American students are more likely to endorse interdependent reasons (“helping” others, giving back, responsiveness, connecting to others, sense of belonging) for attending college, this knowledge should be utilized by program faculty to motivate and support students. Programs should consider redesigning their culture, teaching practices, and academic support services to be more inclusive of first-generation college students.

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