First Generation College Students

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Historical Background of the Issue

First Generation Students (FGS) are a population within the educational system who exhibit a particular set of needs. In 1992, “20% of reported first year college students were first-generation college students” (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014, p. 3). According to Shelton (2011), between 1995 and 1996, “34% of students entering U.S four-year colleges and 53% of students starting at two-year or community colleges were first-generation students” (p. 65). First Generation Student needs include the need for financial assistance due to no support from their family, need for emotional and moral support with the transition from high school to college, a need for programs which will assist in the barrier of FGS parents not understanding the college application process and lastly the need of encouragement from educators and family members. They are “traditionally defined as students whose parents did not attend college and have only a high school education or less” (Shelton, 2011, p. 63). Throughout the past few decades, a rising concern has been over the educational obstacles a majority of these students’ experience.

Necessitate the Policy/Issue

Higher education laws have aided First Generation Students towards continuing their education. In Part A of the Title IV section of The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 1965, student assistance is discussed through the use of Federal TRIO Programs. In Section 403. TRIO refers to three early college preparation and readiness programs: Upward Bound, Educational Talent Search, and Student Support Services.

In an interview with Mrs. Jenny Watts, coordinator of the Upward Bound Program at Tarleton State University, an overview of what the Upward Bound program entails was
Upward Bound is a program which offers opportunities for participants to succeed in their pre-college performance and ultimately in their higher education pursuits. Upward Bound serves local high school students from low-income families and high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree. The program is financially funded by the government and students receive a stipend as an incentive to attend monthly meetings. In a majority of the circumstance the students Upward Bound serves are those who meet the criteria of being identified as a first generation college student. In 1998, Howard University wrote a journal article pertaining to the history and evolution of the Upward Bound Program.

The Educational Talent Search program seeks to identify and assist individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have the potential to succeed in higher education. This program finds those students who might otherwise be overlooked in the college preparation process. It is charged with providing these students with academic, career, and financial counseling to help them graduate from high school and enroll and succeed in the postsecondary institution of their choice. The program also serves high school dropouts by encouraging them to reenter the educational system, complete high school, and pursue postsecondary education.

Student support services (SSS) are designed to work with students who are first generation, low income, and have a documented disability. SSS programs provide college students from disadvantaged backgrounds with assistance in meeting basic college requirements, opportunities for academic development, and motivation to successfully complete their postsecondary education. The goal of SSS is to increase the college retention and graduation rates of its participants and facilitate their transition from one level of higher education to the next.

Policy Description
In August 1964, in the midst of his administration's "War on Poverty," President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act. This legislation gave rise to the Office of Economic Opportunity and its Special Programs for Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds or, as they have since become more commonly known, the nation's TRIO programs. The first TRIO initiative, Upward Bound, came into existence as part of this statute. Talent Search, which was created by the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965, followed soon thereafter. When the HEA was first reauthorized in 1968, it established TRIO's Student Support Services program and transferred all of TRIO from the Office of Economic Opportunity to the Office of Higher Education Programs. When the HEA was reauthorized in 1972, the fourth TRIO program, Educational Opportunity Centers (EOC), was created. The expansion of TRIO's reach and outreach continued in 1976 with the creation of the TRIO Staff and Leadership Training Authority (SLTA). The fifth TRIO program, the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program, was created in 1986. Most recently, in 1990, the U.S. Department of Education created the Upward Bound Math/Science Program, which is administered under the same regulations as other Upward Bound programs (McElroy & Armesto, 1998).

**Objective Analysis**

According to the American Council on Education, since the original Higher Education Act (HEA) was created in 1965, the law governing federal financial aid programs has been rewritten eight separate times. Section 403 looks at how these programs can be improved and made more effective and beneficial to the student. The HEA’s long existence gives proof to the expansion, constant debate, and assessment of the progress of the act. The Act, at its inception and through many of its reauthorizations, created new access programs such as the TRIO programs that sought to prepare socially and economically disadvantaged high school students
for the rigors of college. The Act also expanded funding through grants (Johnson, 2014.) The 1968 reauthorization expanded access by increasing the number of federally funded precollege encouragement programs. Under this reauthorization, “the administration also took steps to increase private lending in the Guaranteed Student Loan program.” The 1972, 1976, and 1978 reauthorizations similarly expanded access but also continued to respond to the government’s growing financial aid cost. The 1972 reauthorization provided additional resources for grant aid for students thereby reducing the need for loans for the neediest students. “The goal here was to make grant programs the core of the financial aid package so that the neediest students would be less dependent on loans in pursuing higher education. Additionally, this also marked an increase in federal spending toward “removing impediments” to higher education and, thus, showed the government’s commitment to higher education for those most in need during that area.”

During the 1976 reauthorization, the trend in government spending continued. There was grant expansion under this reauthorization so that less needy students would also be eligible to receive aid. It was during this reauthorization in which FGS students now had a greater accessibility to receiving financial aid and assistance solving the barrier of financial struggles, to obtaining a college degree.

**Arguments in Favor**

**Arguments against Issue**

**Communication with Legislator**

In a recent visit on March 3, 2015 to the State Capitol of Texas in Austin, an interview was conducted with administrative assistant to Senator Craig Estes, Katherine Metcalf, in regards to the first generation population. Ms. Metcalf willingly provided her personal experience with the First Generation College Population. As a Caucasian female in her late 20s, she knew her
experience of being first generation compared greatly to other students of the first generation population. Being the daughter of a single parent and attending a high school where little assistance from educators and counselors was provided caused “frustration and confusion” for Ms. Metcalf and her mother. Ms. Metcalf always knew she wanted to attend college, but in the back of her mind she feared it would not happen due to the simple lack of resources and knowledge. In addition, she was unaware if she met the requirements necessary for scholarships or financial aid from the government. Much like Ms. Metcalf, there are several other First Generation Students who face these exact issues. With the assistance of laws put in place, such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act, FGS can better access resources to improve their goal of obtaining higher education.

**Petition & Rally Efforts**

On March 26, 2015 seven colleagues from the Social Welfare Policy class and I put forth a rally on Tarleton State University’s campus in Stephenville, TX. The purpose of the rally was to raise awareness for First Generation College students. As a group the main focus was to have a variety of speakers present who would help in emphasizing the barriers in resources for FGS students. Of the seven speakers present ranging from staff and faculty members to directors and current students all seven were First Generation. When actively listening to the testimonial of each speaker it became evident that the issues faced, all involved communication. One speaker stated “I simply did not know how to ask for help”, another said “I was unaware of what resources were available to me.” Statements like these were heard over and over again and in the end it was clear that the gaps in resources was a simply issue such as the lack of communication. This lack of communication is not only present between FGS students and the universities but
additionally it is the inability to understand the policies in place that can aid FGS students such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act.

**Evaluation of the Issue**

With the assistance from the government and TRIO programs First Generation Students have the opportunity to face a more clear and obtainable path to achieving higher education. Policies pertaining to higher education have proven to benefit these students.

**Implications for Social Work**
References


Blackwell, E., & Pinder, P. J. (2014). What are the motivational factors of first-generation minority college students who overcome their family histories to pursue higher education? *College Student Journal, 48*(1), 45.


