

Legislative Efforts to Support First Generation Students

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the population of first generation students and their encounters in the higher education system, and focuses on a policy analysis on the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. The paper provides information over the historical background and issues of first generation students as well as a policy description, which includes an objective analysis and arguments in favor of the issue. The paper also includes efforts made by a group of social work students, such as communicating with legislators on the issue of first generation students and rally/petition efforts. Furthermore, a critical evaluation is provided on the issue of first generation students and the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 in relation to them as well as implications of social work with the population of first generation students.

### Introduction

First generation students are a select population among the system of higher education who exhibit their own sets of needs and concerns. These students are “traditionally defined as students whose parents did not attend college and have a high school education or less” (Shelton, 2011, p. 63). They are without parents “who understand the process of adjusting to college life” and they have “limited role models” (Woosley & Shepler, 2011, p. 3). First generation students have different experiences with the process of achieving higher education.

The educational experience they encounter is similar to their classmates; however, they “typically lack the traditional support networks available to their peers whose parents earned degrees” (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013, p. 46). They navigate through the system of college on their own. The issues encountered by this population surround their status as being the first in their family to take the path towards higher education.

The experiences first generation students have during their educational career affect their degree obtainability as they are “often considered at risk of leaving an institution” due to the issues that prohibit their ability to effectively move forward and progress in their educational endeavors (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013, p. 46). Active legislative steps can be taken to provide assistance in eliminating or overcoming the issues that prohibit or delay their college completion.

In the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, Section 404, gaining early awareness and readiness for undergraduate programs, legislative steps are in place to address the issues in the higher education system similar to the ones first generation students encounter in their educational career. The policy aims to provide several activities and programs to help students in “obtaining a secondary school diploma” and to “prepare for and succeed in post-secondary

education,” such as financial assistance, mentoring, additional counseling, and academic support (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3206). In the policy, high school is referred to as secondary education and college is referred to as post-secondary education.

### Historical Background

Evidence is present on the increased number of first generation students entering college nationwide. In 1992, “20% of reported first year college students were first-generation college students” (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014, p. 3). When examining the population of students in higher education almost ten years later in 2001, first generation students represented “approximately 30% of attendance at U.S colleges and universities” (Swecker, Fifolt, & Searby, 2013, p. 46). Furthermore, in a more recent time period, research “determined that an average of one of every three students at a four year college or university and one of two at a community college are first-generation students” (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009, p. 2). These statistics represent the increased rate first generation students are attending college.

In addition, they are also “nearly four times more likely (26% to 7%) to leave higher education after the first year than non-first generation students” (Stebbleton & Soria, 2012, p. 8). They are also “more likely to have lower undergraduate grade point averages, and less likely to complete their degrees than non-first generation college students” (Olson, 2014, p.199).

First generation students are experiencing issues in areas such as “educational persistence, precollege academic preparation, and financing their college education” (Shelton, 2011, p. 63). In regards to academic performance, first generation students are entering the college atmosphere with a “lack [of] academic preparation” or educational resilience as they are realizing “their high school curriculum was less than rigorous and that the academic expectations inherent in baccalaureate programs can be somewhat overwhelming, resulting in self-doubt”

(Woosley & Shepler, 2011, p. 3). The transition from high school into college is an experience they encounter issues with throughout their educational career.

They also experience issues with financing their education and are more likely to “come from families in the lowest income quartile” (Shelton, 2011, p. 64). As a result, they are without the option of financial freedom and must often use “a loan to pay for college” and other college expenses (Shelton, 2011, p. 66). In addition to financing their college education, a study by Coffman (2011) determined “low income levels strongly influence factors such as having a support network, college debt and degree completion” (p. 84). These factors contribute to the issues first generation students encounter as a “lack of financial support and subsequent loan indebtedness may affect chances of college success” (Hertel, 1997, p.6).

Another factor that contributes to the issues is the overall status of being the first to attend college in their family as “family background can influence the mistakes first generation students make in choosing high school courses, managing time, and not knowing how to perform the student role” (Coffman, 2011, p. 83). These students are the first generation in their family to attend college and are without access to information over the process. They do not have family members who have attended college and enter the college atmosphere with “little knowledge” on how to navigate the higher education system (Shelton, 2011).

Necessitate the Policy

First generation students make up a significant portion of college students in the United States as “one in six (15.9 %)” students fit into the demographic (Irlbeck, Adams, Akers, Burris, & Jones, 2014, p. 154). When considering numbers of students affected by the status of being a first generation student, the influence and impact this population makes over the higher education system is observable. When examining students across the country in many

community colleges and universities, an average of 30% to 50% of first generation students being affected by the same issues translates into a much greater number (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009). These percentages signify a portion of students across the board are experiencing the same issues, despite demographics or individual background.

First generation students are a population whose concerns necessitate awareness, attention, and effort. These students need a variety of assistance to help facilitate with the process of higher education to aid in increasing their graduation and retention rates (Shelton, 2011). The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, Section 404, encompasses sections addressing issues in higher education, such as academic readiness. The act provides funds to enable steps to be taken in order to facilitate with the issues college students are encountering. The policy has goals that aid in implementing, funding, creating, and supporting programs which seek to improve and facilitate secondary and post-secondary educational completion. This act allows first generation students to have the opportunity, support, and assistance to overcome their educational issues.

#### Policy Description

The Higher Education Opportunity Act is an amendment and extension of the Higher Education Act of 1965. The act was enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives in the 110<sup>th</sup> U.S Congress in 2008. Section 404 of the act, gaining early awareness and readiness for undergraduate programs, is expected to affect the population of eligible low-income, secondary, or post-secondary students, including those with disabilities, by providing financial grants to entities that allow for the establishment of programs which work to “assist the students in obtaining a secondary school diploma (or it’s recognized equivalent) and to prepare for and succeed in postsecondary education” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3206). The

policy is expected to work through a requirement of entities receiving the grant to provide financial assistance, mentoring, additional counseling, academic support, as well as outreach and supportive services to students participating in the programs.

The resources and opportunities made available by the policy requirement are the program activities for students in secondary and post-secondary education to further facilitate with the process of achieving higher education, some of which are providing information over financial aid, the importance of higher education, college preparation, admission requirements, as well as awareness of the resources and services. Along with providing information, other activities must include “encouraging” student enrollment in “challenging” course work and “supporting” the development and implementation of Advanced Placement and college preparatory courses (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). In addition, other activities involved are developing graduation and career plans, providing tutors and mentors, as well as academic counseling, and financial and economic literacy education.

The policy is to be implemented by The Secretary of State, who is authorized to establish the programs, as well as the eligible entities, such as local educational agencies, degree granting institutions of higher education, and community or professional organizations that are receiving the grants under Section 404 of the Higher Education Opportunity Act. The eligible entities are to implement the policy by carrying out the programs and providing the services, opportunities, and resources listed above to students.

The policy seeks to “reduce the risk of such students dropping out of school” and “the need for remedial education for such students at the postsecondary level” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3206). Furthermore, the policy is also expected to accomplish the task

of “working to align state academic standards and curricula with the expectations of postsecondary institutions and employers” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3212).

Long term and short term benefits of the policy are “ensuring secondary school completion and postsecondary education enrollment of at-risk students,” as well as “fostering and improving parent and family involvement” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3211). Other benefits are helping students to “succeed academically in, and to prepare financially for postsecondary education,” to give them a “head start on attaining a recognized postsecondary credential...that give students early exposure to college-level course and experiences,” and “allow students to earn transferable college credits or an associate’s degree at the same time as a secondary school diploma” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3211).

The expected existence of the policy is long term and requires the funding of “\$400,000,000 for fiscal year 2009 and such sums as may be necessary or each of the five succeeding fiscal years” (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008, p. 3215). The administrative considerations in performing the policy are non-existent. The effectiveness will be measured through an evaluation of the programs by the eligible entities. They are required to “biennially evaluate the activities” and “track eligible student progress during the period such students are participating in the activities” and “shall be consistent with the standards developed by The Secretary” of State and to “submit to the Secretary a copy of such evaluation” (Higher Education Act of 1965, 2014, p. 223). The Secretary is responsible for providing standards for the evaluations that include “input from eligible entities and service providers” and that “ensure data protocols and procedures are consistent and uniform” (Higher Education Act of 1965, 2014, p. 224). The Secretary is then expected to report the evaluations biennially to Congress.



### Objective Analysis (Goals & Feasibility)

The main goals and objectives of the policy are to reduce the risk of students dropping out of secondary and post-secondary school and to ensure the completion of secondary education while also preparing them to enroll and complete postsecondary education. Another goal is for students to attain academic achievement and to reduce the need of remedial education in postsecondary education. The policy also has objectives of preparing students for postsecondary college financially, as well as allowing them to earn transferable college credits by providing early exposure to college level courses, enrolling students in college preparatory courses, and raising awareness over resources.

The goal of reducing the risk of students discontinuing school, ensuring secondary education completion, and preparing them for postsecondary education are achievable through the activities designed in the policy. By assisting the students through the resources, opportunities, and services required of the programs, the goals of preparing students for postsecondary education are also feasible through these activities. The program activities and services promote and contribute to the attainment of the goals desired in the policy and create a higher probability of their attainment.

### Arguments in Favor/Against Issue

Several arguments from various organizations and groups support efforts to address the issues surrounding first generation students and the issues they confront during their educational career while arguments against the issue appear nonexistent for this population group.

Additionally, arguments exist in favor of serving the population of first generation students to increase degree attainment and retention rates in higher education. The National College Access Network describes the necessity of achieving a post-secondary education:

In today's economy, a postsecondary credential is in greater demand than ever before. By 2020, 65 percent of U.S. jobs will require some form of postsecondary education, but only 39 percent of U.S. working-age adults hold a postsecondary credential as of 2012. Postsecondary education is also increasingly the only route to upward mobility. The lowest income Americans who obtain a college degree are five times more likely than their peers to escape poverty. (n.p.)

Additional organizations such as The League for Innovation in the Community College (2012) describes the issue and a solution to assist the students in higher education by presenting the argument:

First-generation college students (FGCS) present distinct challenges to higher education institutions, challenges that can be overcome by providing these students with information and support they may need to succeed and by ensuring that faculty and staff are aware of the obstacles many of these students face on their college journey. (n.p.)

The League for Innovation in the Community College (2012) also states that “complementing high school outreach with supportive college admissions, registration, financial aid, orientation, and student success programs further ensures that these courageous first-generation college students complete their studies and reach their goal of becoming first-generation college graduates.”

Furthermore, the organization Grad Nation: America's Promise Alliance focuses on first generation students and the issues they encounter, as well as providing recommendations and solutions to aid them in their endeavors. In their article “Improving Access and Success for First-Generation College Students”, the organization (2012) states:

First-generation college students – and potential first-generation students – face an array of challenges in accessing and succeeding in post-secondary education. But many policies and programs have been shown to be effective at overcoming those challenges and should therefore be incentivized, funded and implemented. Every young person, regardless of personal situation, deserves a chance to succeed. Indeed, the success of this country as a whole is dependent on it. (n.p.)

These organizations provide arguments supporting solutions and efforts similar to the ones presented in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 for first generation students in overcoming educational barriers, as well as the need to increase degree attainment rates and retention rates in higher education.

#### Communication from Legislators

Further efforts were engaged in by a group of social work students to gain alternative perspectives and arguments on the issues first generation students encounter, as well as possible solutions from representatives of legislators at the Texas Capital. Input was also received regarding legislation aimed at serving the population of first generation students. In communicating with an administrative assistant for Senator Craig Estes, Katherine Metcalf, a perspective was gained from her experience as a first generation student, as well as possible solutions and circumstances surrounding legislation targeted at first generation students.

Ms. Metcalf described her situation as a first generation student from a single-parent home and provided information over barriers she encountered such as lacking academic preparation and information over financing her education, being unaware of resources and services to address her problems, and lacking an understanding on the process of achieving higher education. She suggested solutions aimed at providing information and assistance to

students who lack parental guidance in their academic endeavors, as well as mentoring programs and individual student attention to address their needs (Metcalf, Personal Communication, March 3, 2015).

Ms. Metcalf also referred to the lack of legislation aimed specifically at serving the population of first generation students in their educational career and the barriers in creating and implementing such legislation. She mentioned the subject as a difficult area to address and stressed the need to understand why first generation students should be identified to prevent discrimination. She also stated that care needs to be taken in implanting laws that may “overstep parental decisions” (Metcalf, Personal Communication, March 3, 2015).

Furthermore, the students also communicated with Legislative Director Amanda Kit Tollet for the State Representative of District 59, J.D. Sheffield. Ms. Tollet gained information on the barriers that first generation students encounter and suggested solutions such as peer mentors, student counselors, follow ups, and encouraging student involvement on campus to create connections. She also referred to the lack of legislation for first generation students by explaining the difficulty in “targeting populations in huge pieces of legislation” (Tollet, Personal Communication, Mar. 3, 2015).

#### Petition and Rally Efforts

The group of social work students also made additional efforts of having a petition signed by the local community, as well as hosting a local rally on March 26, 2015 to raise support for first generation students and awareness on the issues they encounter in the higher education system. The petition gathered 200 signatures and the rally occurred on the campus of Tarleton State University and included speakers, students, and participants associated with the university, as well as resources aimed at providing services on campus.

The resources made available offered assistance in the areas that first generation students encounter issues in. Resources were offered for academic preparation with tutoring, student mentoring, and study session services, as well as resources for financing higher education with scholarships, grants, work/study opportunities, and student loans. There was also additional resources offered for counseling, health services on campus, academic advising services for degree plans, career development, and housing. The speakers were members of several student-focused programs and associations on the campus. They provided information over their role, the purpose of their programs, or their personal experience as a first generation student.

By conducting the rally, an insight was given over the issues first generation students experience and the large impact they have in pursuing higher education to the local community. An opportunity was also presented to assist students in their educational experiences by offering resources and services aimed at overcoming the issues. The social work students also had the opportunity of interacting with first generation students to gain additional understanding over the issues that affected the students on a personal level with their educational experience.

#### Critical Evaluation of the Issue

First generation students represent a large portion of students in the higher education system who have continued to confront the same barriers in higher education due their status. The barriers have remained consistent among the population over the past few decades and have affected their degree attainment, graduation rates, and retention rates, despite individual differences. Through legislation, such as the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, students are presented with the opportunity, support, and assistance to facilitate with the process of achieving higher education. The legislation aims at enacting policies to assist students by

implementing, funding, creating, and supporting programs that improve and facilitate with the process of attending higher education.

Legislation focusing on assisting the population of first generation students in their educational careers to improve their retention and graduation rates, as well as their degree attainment, does not exist. The absence of this policy is a limitation for the population as they have not been solely targeted to receive assistance in their academic endeavors due to their status and the issues they confront. The nonexistent policy contributes to the lack of attention and assistance needed by the students.

However, through legislation such as section 404 of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, first generation students can gain access to programs and activities that assist in the same issues they encounter. The services made available through the legislation, such as providing information over financial aid, the importance of higher education, college preparation, admission requirements, as well as awareness of the resources and services, can be utilized by first generation students to complete their educational career. They can also access the other opportunities and activities made available by the act, such as encouraging student enrollment in challenging course work and supporting the development and implementation of Advanced Placement and college preparatory courses, developing graduation and career plans, providing tutors and mentors as well as academic counseling, and financial and economic literacy education to facilitate with the process of higher education.

Policies, such as the ones created in the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, can assist first generation students and contribute to their academic achievement by alleviating the issues they encounter. Through similar policies, the students can gain access to the resources and services they most need in the areas they confront issues in. They can continue to access these

policies to receive needed assistance until further legislation can be developed to focus on assisting the population of first generation students with the issues they confront in the higher education system.

### Implications for Social Work

Implications for social work for the population of first generation students and the issues they associate with vary on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. By working on the micro level, social workers can provide direct assistance to individuals who are first generation students to help them overcome the issues they are experiencing in the pursuit of higher education. The social worker can use the Generalist Intervention Model to serve the student by assessing which areas they are in need of assistance. Through this, the social worker can identify problems and needs prohibiting their academic achievement and can work to determine goals and appropriate plans unique to the individual. This assistance may come in many forms due to the possible issues first generation students encounter. The social worker can help the individual locate and access resources and services to help in employment, housing, social support networks, financial concerns, and any other issues. By directly assisting the individual, the social worker can provide the student with help in circumstances prohibiting their degree completion.

Social work can also be utilized on the mezzo level by working with families of first generation students. The social worker can assist the student by educating the family and the individual on the process of attending higher education and providing needed services and resources to the student that are made unavailable through the family. The social worker can also facilitate by guiding them through the process of attending higher education and helping to offer and set up needed support to the student. The social worker can also help guide groups of faculty

and staff in higher education to assist first generation students by offering education over the issues experienced and the various types of assistance that can be offered.

On the macro level, social workers can assist the population of first generation students by working with communities and society to assist the students. They can do so by advocating for policy and legislation aimed at helping the students in their academic endeavors. They can also contribute to the population by engaging in research to provide needed information on the students and the issues they experience in higher education to enact policy/legislation, raise support/awareness, create effective solutions, or to provide an understanding on the factors and reasons behind them that are affecting the students. Furthermore, social workers can create or build programs to facilitate with the process of achieving higher education for first generation students and the areas they experience issues.



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