Attracting and Retaining First Generation Students at the University of Idaho Report

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The University of Idaho has identified a problem: attracting and maintaining first-generation college students. A review of the literature reveals that these students, often called “first-gens”, may have unique characteristics that can impact their college dreams. The phenomenon surrounding first generation students’ factors and shared experiences appears to affect a variety of universities across the country (Boyington, 2015).

INTRODUCTION
The purpose of this study was to seek to understand first-generation students enrolled at the University of Idaho in hope of revealing and examining what attracts them to attend and persist at the University of Idaho.

The research questions posed were:

Research Question 1: Are there characteristic themes that emerge to understand what attracts and encourages first-generation Idaho high school graduates to attend the University of Idaho?

Research Question 2: What aspects of the university have helped first-generation Idaho high school student to continue and persevere on to graduation (Ishitani, 2006).

Although some research has shown the differences in retention and performance rates in first-generation students compared to their peers, many agree that there is still a lack of research with this population while suggesting that first-generation college students share distinct and particular traits. Additionally, there are findings that suggest that more study on this topic will provide better understanding and illuminate how social patterns, values and structures present different points of reference for these students whose chances for completing advanced education are decreased. “The plight of first-generation college students at today’s American colleges and universities has worsened due to the skyrocketing costs of higher education” (Banks-Santilli, L. 2014, p. 2). The findings in this study of first-generation college students from the state of Idaho centered on revealing what aspects of the university had positively and negatively impacted the participants’ experiences and successes in completing their higher education.

Approximately 36 percent of the University of Idaho’s incoming students are first-generation
students. Attracting these students is not the only issue; many universities have extremely low graduation rates for their first-generation students. Retaining these students through to graduation is also a major problem (Riggs, 2014).

With a population of first generation college students comprising one-third of students at the University of Idaho, providing the appropriate resources to get students into college and keep them there is particularly important to the university. Garza, Bain, & Kupeczynski (2014) state in their study, *Resiliency, Self-Efficacy, and Persistence of College Seniors in Higher Education*, “The literature revealed that students, especially first-generation students lack knowledge which forces them to drop out within the first year of college (Ceballo, 2004; Fuligni, 1997; Zalaquett & Feliciano, 2004).” The literature also reveals, in some cases disparities and disadvantages stemming from differing perspectives and expectations of first-generation students versus their non first-generation peers and classmates. Banks-Santilli, (2014) in her article, *First-Generation College Students and Their Pursuit of the American Dream*, explored this concept, “While first-generation college students rely on the advice from guidance counselors and relatives to select colleges, non first-generation students consider a college’s reputation, availability of graduate programs, school rankings, and cost (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; London, 1989).” This research sought to illuminate the identification and significance of various support networks available at the University of Idaho as recognized and determined by the first-gen interviewed.

**Definition of Terms**

**First-generation student:** students in their junior or senior year at the University of Idaho completing their requirements for graduation whose parents are not college graduates.

**Idaho high school student:** a student who received a high school diploma or GED from the state of Idaho.

**Interview participant:** a student randomly selected who met the defined criteria for the research study.

The following paper explains the methodology, results, and implications of our study, aimed at understanding the experience(s) that first-generation students have throughout their college career. Participants came from throughout the state as indicated on the following map.
METHOD OF STUDY
Participants of this study were students at the University of Idaho and at least nineteen years of age. These students were either junior or seniors and first-generation students. First-generation students, for the purposes of this study, are students whose parents have not graduated from a four-year college or university. This is a common definition used in prior studies (Soria & Stebleton; Choy, 2001; Pike and Kuh, 2005). First-generation students may have parents who had previously attended college but did not see their degree to full-fruition. The participants may have an older or younger sibling(s) who have attended or are attending college.

To recruit participants, a list of approximately 1,000 first-generation students was provided by the University of Idaho bursar's office. The five members of our team each received a portion of this list and contacted those on the list to recruit volunteers for individual interviews. Participants were required to be first-generation students who graduated from a high school in Idaho and who were junior or seniors in standing. A total of 48 participants were interviewed, one African American, three Native Americans, fourteen Hispanics, and thirty Caucasians.

APPROACHES
In qualitative research, data collection often includes conducting interviews, general observations, and having group sessions. There is an emphasis on collecting strong, personalized data in the form of lived experiences, “It is only when we understand the underlying values of respondents and research participants that we can begin to understand where conflict exists and where negotiation around larger issues might be engaged” (Paul, 2005, p. 63). There are different approaches to qualitative studies, which are influenced by the lens that the researcher chooses to take, transcribed verbatim interviews were produced and coded for themes utilizing a salience hierarchy strategy incorporating the researcher’s field notes and perspective. “Tacit knowledge may also be developed in situ, so that a case may seem deviant
just with respect to others observed. These other cases form the contrasts—in other words, the background knowledge—that lead to the identification of certain cases as deviant” (Wolfinger, N.H., 2002, p. 89). This is helpful to provide insight and direction to theory development.

In this study, each of five researchers took a different approach to the study. These approaches include grounded theory, ethnographic, biographical, case study and a phenomenological approach.

**Grounded Theory Approach**
In grounded theory “the researcher generates an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, a theory that explains some action, interaction, or process” (Creswell, 2013). In simpler terms, this methodology promotes the creation of new theory from the data, rather than the testing of existing theories. It is important to note that there are two main perspectives within the grounded theory methodology: traditional and constructivist. Aligning more with the constructivist view, emphasis on the views, values, beliefs, feelings, assumptions, and ideologies of individuals rather than on research methods was utilized.

Sample research questions that guided this study’s inquiry were: What theory explains the motivation of first-generation rural Idaho high school students to transition to college and persist? What phenomena contribute to these students’ successful transition from high school to college? What phenomena contribute to these students’ persistence on to graduation?

**Ethnographic Approach**
Ethnography involves, “telling a credible, rigorous, and authentic story” (Fetterman, 2010, 1). The ethnographer conducts research by interacting with other human beings that are part of the study; this interaction takes many forms, from conversations and interviews to shared ritual and emotional experiences” (Murchison, 2010, 4). One interview question posed through the ethnographic approach was: “If you could whisper into the ear of the University of Idaho administrative staff what advice would you give them about improving things for first-generation students who come to the University of Idaho?”

**Biographical Approach**
The purpose of biographical research is not to prove, but to understand through individuals’ sharing of personal accounts from their life story (Merriam, 2009). A sample interview question posed through the biographical approach was: “What other things can you tell me about your experiences here at the University of Idaho that will help me to gain an understanding of your personal success and/or difficulties?”

**Case Study Approach**
Narrative analysis proposes a means to describe the configuration and framework of stories relayed and told by participants as they describe situations and occurrences. Research focused on school systems of businesses tend to lean towards a narrative analysis to interpret collected information centered on people’s stories (Silverman, 2014). Questions asked through case study included “What attracted you to attend the University of Idaho?” and “What has helped the University of Idaho keep you here?”

**Phenomenological Approach**
Creswell (1998) describes phenomenology as the understanding of several individuals’ lived experiences as a concept for a phenomenon. “The understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 14). In a phenomenological study, two broad questions are asked: one involving the person’s experiences in terms of the phenomenon, and the other exploring the contexts or situations that influenced those experiences.
FINDINGS
Of the 48 participants, 27 females and 21 male students were interviewed.

Grounded Theory
In analyzing the data through grounded theory, five overarching themes emerged: personal motivation, family influence, college environment, student academic support, and extracurricular involvement. One of the research questions examined the contributing phenomena of first-generation students’ successful transition into college. This transition is propelled by the decision to attend college in the first place.

Based on the findings in this study, there are several interconnected factors that contribute to this decision-making. Personal motivation, students’ intrinsic drive to achieve academic success and personal goals seemed to be the most impactful on their decision to attend college. This drive, along with the desire for “better” and the desire to be a role model, motivated students to achieve the goal of graduation, attain the benefits of their education, and seek the rewards of their progress.

Family influence had a powerful impact on students’ decision to transition from high school to college. Familial encouragement and support was effective in helping students to believe college attendance was possible. Considering their financial situations at home was also important in understanding what they needed to do in order to go to transition to college. Lastly, being close to home inclined students to look at University of Idaho as a viable option.

College environment was another variable that drew students to the University of Idaho, specifically encouraging them to attend college. The environment also helped to convince students to persist on to graduation by providing appealing surroundings and social connections.

Student academic support was found to be essential for providing assistance to first-generation students and ensuring that they wanted to persist on.
Finally, extracurricular involvement offered students a purpose to persist because they had committed themselves to outside activities, obligations, and responsibilities. Such involvement kept the students accountable to others, as well as to their extracurricular responsibilities.

Ethnography
Building on the analysis of the core concepts related to literature, several themes were identified as findings through a critical ethnographic lens showing the shared patterns of the participants:

✓ Campus Support: Support in terms of instruction and academics; small class sizes; counseling services.

✓ Campus Involvement: Clubs, Societies, Greek System.

✓ Financial Support: scholarship and financial assistance specific to first generation students.

✓ External/ Outside Organizational Support: CAMP, TRiO.

✓ Cultural Support: Not having parents who are alumni of the university; cultural views of gender and roles within society.

Biography
Through biographical questioning the recognition of “markers” or distinct directional signs were identified as keeping first-generation students on the path of getting them to and keeping them at the University of Idaho. One specific marker identified was that of Vandal Friday.

Three of the four selected biography students mentioned that visiting the university had a direct impact on their decision to attend the University of Idaho. Vandal Friday is a big deciding factor for these students. In fact, one participant is quoted as saying “Vandal Friday was the one thing that made me like 100% excited to come to the University of Idaho and they are changing Vandal Friday a lot and I think that is one thing that will make it so people will not want to come.”

This past year funds were reduced in the amount that was spent on Vandal Friday. This is a marker that the University of Idaho should not cut or reduce funding to because it has such an impact on the decision making of first-generation students. There are many things that the University of Idaho can do to attract and retain first-generation students into the world of higher education and this is one thing that should be continued.

Case Study
“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by And that has made all the difference.”

~Robert Frost 1974-1863

Through collecting field note interviews, listening and observing, this ethnographic case study research gathered information through a constructionist lens ever mindful of illuminating, explaining, and clarifying meaning to enhance cognitive engagement. “Meaning-making thus engages two dimensions of individual social life: actual events and concrete situations, and the participations and individual mental stances which impute meaning to those events and situations” (Paul, 2005, p.60). This view of research provided a blueprint in which to plan a framework where the guiding questions defined focus for what would be examined and provided a springboard to foster other questions that would probe for deeper understanding and meaning.

The information from the interviews also sought to align the case study research design with a framework that incorporated multiple qualitative questioning strategies intended to acquire information of potential value to the university regarding the characteristics of the first-generation students. Clustered sub-themes were ascertained from comparison of the priori and emergent codes until a saturation point occurred. (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Subsequently, descriptive results from verbatim interviews regarding various beliefs and values that
assist or shape the perceptions of first-generation Idaho high school students. This brings to light various influences and biases that point to emergent themes from the interviews from the case study perspective.

✓ **Sustainability:** Recruitment, mentors, programs, communication.

✓ **Recruitment:** Ambassadors, Counselors, Teachers, Recruiters, Career Fairs, Satellite Campuses, Community Colleges, Extended Family.

✓ **Mentors:** Faculty, Staff, Community, Field Experience, Classmates.

✓ **Programs:** CAMP, Counseling and Testing Center, SSS/TRiO, Housing, Scholastic Clubs, Social Clubs, Disability Support Services, Field Experience.

**Phenomenology**

Through phenomenological study researchers seek to understand lived experiences as a phenomenon. Participants had the following shared experiences:

✓ **Familial influence.** Parents played a major factor in why students chose to attend college.

✓ **Positive experience with resources.** When asked what their most positive influence at the university was, many participants’ replies had to do with the support services available on campus. These services included the financial aid office, the counseling center and individual faculty members.

✓ **Experiencing Mental Health Issues.** Perhaps the most important theme unveiled was that nearly every participant faced issues with depression or anxiety.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Advertisement of Scholarship – Logistical Support in the University Setting – Markers to the University Faculty Involvement & Support – Mental Health Support

Advertising scholarship and funding can apply to all potential students, first-generation or third. However, first-generation students are less likely to understand exactly what it takes to go to college and pay for it since they haven’t had anyone before them as models. It is recommended that the University of Idaho become more proactive about educating potential students about exactly what they need and what they can expect. Paying for college is overwhelming for most students especially if a career choice is uncertain or the experience is socially or culturally unexpected. Fear and lack of information continues to surface as a major decisive factor for first-generation students choosing not to advance their education to include college courses. Preparing and guiding students especially first generation enrollees on the financial aspects of college early in their planning (during high school) plus assisting and informing parents or guardians of options could increase their college attendance.

Providing for logistical support programs at the University of Idaho promotes an increased level of faculty support/involvement, campus support, campus involvement, organizational support, financial support and cultural support for first generation students studying at the University of Idaho. Looking at models from other institutions can help the University of Idaho create additional programs to support first generation students who choose to come to the university to complete their degree objectives.
College for first-generation students should not be like the story of Alice in Wonderland with students falling haphazardly and unaware into the metaphorical ‘rabbit hole,’ confused and not knowing which way they want to go. Identifying markers and directional signs from which first-generation students can seek guidance and support such as Vandal Friday, allows for students’ success in their college pursuits. Additionally, by maintaining networks and support systems or markers along the way, these students will be encouraged to maximize their experience and persist toward graduation and life long learning. The University of Idaho can make the experiences better for current first-generation students but can also be better at attracting and retaining these students in the first place.

Developing life long learners is generally a goal on various mission statements of educational agencies, “since the 1960’s the Republican and Democratic parties have espoused different variations on human capital ideology” (Spring, 2011, p. 119). The notion of viewing the citizens of a society primarily in terms of a human resources formula that expands and encourages expansion through the economic growth and productivity of its workers is an underlying philosophy that factors into political decisions regarding what high school students need to know in order to graduate equipped for the world of work. Although each state factors in their unique voice all derive their ideals based on the premise “…that the primary purpose of schooling is to grow the economy and ensure America’s place in global economic competition.” (Spring, 2011, p. 119). The University of Idaho is funded in part by the Idaho taxpayers and it makes fiscal sense to maximize the benefits of advanced courses beyond high school to its own citizens. Additionally, with more Idaho residents seeking advanced degrees the state would ultimately obtain the benefits of a better-educated population.

The university is doing its part with mental health support in providing the students with the appropriate help when they seek it. However, if we combine a higher risk of having mental health issues with the problem that students face regarding not knowing about available resources on campus, it may mean that students do not know what resources are available to them if they face mental health issues while attending the university. On this front, the university needs to make resources better known to first-generation students.

The findings of this interview research study reflect and mirror the findings and themes revealed in many of the previous studies. This research extends the types of themes in breadth and scope found in other university settings. This study encourages future research in the dynamics surrounding first-generation students attending the University of Idaho and the systems that need to be in place to encourage their attendance and continued support. In the educational setting, those who work with first-generational college students need to be aware of their special requirements and perspectives. These are students who have not historically been heard and should now be invited to join the scholarly conversations to share their vision for the future of the state of Idaho. Future directions in research point toward investigating characteristic dynamics surrounding first-generation students plus identifying support systems that facilitate their success as follows:

- ✔ What logistical support and mentoring at the University of Idaho is beneficial to the overall success and experience of first-generation students?
- ✔ What socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural awareness must be address and understood in order to assist first-generation students’ success towards graduation?
- ✔ What factors and components are fostered in communities that promote first-generation students to transcend their circumstances and succeed at the University of Idaho?
REFERENCES


