**Considerations for Supporting the Wellbeing and Success of First Generation College Students**

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Naturally, each of these points can develop into an ongoing conversation for us in our goal of addressing the needs of first generation college students to enhance success and retention. The goal of this brief article is to plant seeds and to encourage each of us to have a broad informed perspective in our advising, mentoring and teaching of first generation college students. It is important to consider how the student’s multiple cultural identities intersect and are expressed within a context (home, school, work) and the adaptations they make when they are active in each setting.

Ask yourself, how does the student’s race/ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, gender, sexual orientation, ability status, religion, educational background and experiences (veteran/service member, international student, English as a second language student, etc.) impact their sense of belonging and engagement at Cal Poly Pomona.

Being a first generation college student is an invisible status that cuts across different ethnic groups, nationalities and backgrounds. Students vary in the degree to which they identify with their First Generation College Student status. Interventions yield the most benefit if administered early (Within first 2 years). Interventions that benefit low income first generation college students are likely to benefit the general student population (Thayer, 2000).

First Generation College Students (FGCS) May Experience:

* Lower levels of educational socialization within the family.

This means decreased opportunities for vicarious learning from similar and/or accessible models or peers, less preparation for college, less guidance in making decisions, less familiarity of the bureaucratic demands of academic institutions, limited experience with academic tasks and time management (London, 1992; Inman & Mayes, 1999; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Vargas, 2004).

* A need to manage and adapt to cultural tensions. The *degree of difference* between the student’s *core identities* and the expectations of college affects the levels of tension faced. Students may be in a constant process of negotiating these internal and external tensions. Student’s may or may not be aware of the emotional impact and energy costs of this negotiation process. They may say, “not much is going on” when it is clear they are facing complex realities.
* Role conflict and role strain.

It’s important to consider how student’s current identity roles fit or conflict with the expectations and demands of the college system.

Existing Identity Roles Vs. College Student Role

-Family First -School first

-Collectivism -Separation/Individualism

-Caretaker -Self-care

-Relationships are Most Important -Studies are the priority

-Family member/Part of Community -Self-focus in choosing career.

-Leader/Provider/Parent -Student

* A need to manage parental relationships.

Perception of parental support is a predictor of retention and success (Thayer, 2002). There are real distinctions between **expressed** support and **actual** support. Struggles may ensue when parental support may be unintentionally critical, uninformed, invalidating, or may be coupled with unrealistic expectations. Well-intended parental opinions may be perceived as pressure by the student. It is important to seek to understand the importance of the student’s commitment to their family role. Initially, it may be difficult for them to hear they need to “focus on their needs.” FGCS students, like all students, will benefit from learning to communicate and negotiate their needs in their family

* FGCS Status may impact a student’s view of themselves as learners

Strengths and supportive factors may include: Past experiences of success and competence, efforts invested in preparing and making it to college, desire to accomplish degree goals, commitment to earn a degree, resilience in family and communities, belief in the Collective value of earning a college degree, pride of own accomplishments & those of past generations, leadership experiences in family or community, and the ability to problem solve and respond to challenges.

Risk Factors may include: Fragile or Decreased Self-Confidence which may be impacted by past

*academic traumas*, perfectionism, feeling different, feeling Inferior, fear of failure & success, difficulties giving themselves credit for past accomplishments (e.g. The Impostor Syndrome).

Dealing with experiences that qualify as racial/ethnic micro-aggressions, dealing with the consequences of covert or overt racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.

Effective strategies help students develop a sense of self-competence (Thayer, 2000).

Overcoming challenges to student’s self-confidence is crucial to gaining entry and succeeding in college (Striplin, 1999).

* Low levels of acculturation to the academic environment and culture.

Universities are systems, which may be drastically different from previous schooling.

Individuals may be entering these systems without readily available role models or guides.

“College requires a cultural journey to a very different land than the one they knew… Surviving the social challenges of higher learning can be at least as demanding as achieving a high grade point average, (Oldfield, 2007).”FGCS adjustment to educational transitions may impact their overall college experience. Transitions are a key time for us to provide support, individually and systemically.

* Varying degrees of openness to seeking help.

Some students are ready to ask for and receive help, others experience barriers. Have a conversation about it to help determine your student’s approach (What is it like for you to seek help?). Orient the student to your approach to advising and help them understand what they can expect from you. It is important for us in helping roles to show flexibility (Atkinson et. al, 1993). You may have to function as an advisor, advocate, facilitator of supports in the student’s life, consultant, change agent, counselor. How we define our role depends on the needs of the student, the source of the problem(s) are these internal/external, and the goal of your interventions.

If these considerations spark your interest in a discussion/workshop to further support student’s wellbeing and success, please contact Selyna Beverly and we will collaborate to create that opportunity.