

Understanding Differences among Community College Students

Across Varying Levels of Parental Education

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to compare the experiences and views that community college students face across multiple levels of parental education. Using a series of logistic regression analyses, the findings of this study demonstrate significant differences and challenges current notions of parental education beyond merely first generation or non-first generation status.

Introduction

First-generation college students—students who do not have a parent who went to college, often encounter major hurdles in the college process. In comparison to students whose parent(s) attended college, first-generation students experience greater challenges to college access (Choy, Horn, Nunez & Chen, 2000; Volle & Federico, 1997), college involvement (Astin, 1984), institutional connectedness (Arredondo, 1999; Astin, 1984; Terenzini et. al, 1994), academic and social integration (Tinto, 1987, 1993), and degree completion (Nuñez, & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). As such, first-generation students may be especially susceptible to personal doubts regarding their academic and motivational ability (London, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Rendon, 1995; Terenzini et. al, 1994).

While the barriers are well documented, the reasons for such obstacles are less evident. Some research indicates that first-generation students lack support from family and friends and are academically less prepared for college (Volle & Federico, 1997). Other related factors often associated with first-generation status include minority status (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Philippe & Valiga, 2000) and low income (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999). These combined factors have been examined as negatively contributing to students' educational aspirations, academic achievement, and academic integration.

While studies have identified the inequities and their possible sources for first-generation students, few studies have examined this group beyond the simple distinction of first-generation status. In fact, very little is known about how student characteristics vary across different levels of parental education (e.g., junior high school, high school, etc.). Therefore, this study seeks to discover how varying levels of parental education

differentiate students from one another? Secondly, we seek to understand how student views and experiences differ by generational status. This study attempts to not only broaden current views of the important role of parental education but also to delve beyond the flat dichotomous perspective (parents having attended college or not) or linear continuum.

Parental Education is Central

The extant literature identifies “socioeconomic status” (SES) as a predictor of lowered academic success. This link between parent education and SES has been loosely applied to explain why first-generation students are less successful in attending and succeeding in college (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler & Stage, 1999). In other words, first-generation status places students at a unique disadvantage when it comes to college success (Barahona, 1990; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Parental involvement may be directly associated with the information that parents know about college. Parents with first-hand knowledge of postsecondary education may provide their children with better access to information about college, such as course requirements (Choy, Horn, Nunez & Chen, 2000; McDonough, 1997) and how to acquire the means to finance their children’s college education (McDonough 1997). College-educated parents are typically more aware of the long-term benefits of acquiring a college degree and thus share this information with their children (Coleman, 1988). Parents who have not attended college, on the other hand, tend to have less direct knowledge of the economic and social benefits of a postsecondary education. Thus, some of these parents may prefer that their children work rather than attend college. Students whose parents never attended college are sometimes faced with a difficult choice between fulfilling

family expectations or obligations and the pursuit of a degree (Terenzini et. al, 1994; Volle & Federico, 1997). As it pertains to community college students, these students may attend the community college for reasons related to a current job, to develop computer skills, and to enter the workforce (Philippe & Valiga, 2000). Their primary goals were rated as having a secure job or having time for family and friends (Philippe & Valiga, 2000).

Moreover, the difficulties that first-generation students encounter are not solely attributable to their income (Arredondo, 1999). In support of this notion, research demonstrates that low-income students of parents familiar with higher education reported planning to attend college at higher rates than their low income counterparts whose parents did not attend college (King, 1996). Interestingly, other results indicate up to 23 percent of lowest SES parents (based on education, assets, and income) can still provide their children with college guidance (i.e., curricular requirements, financial planning, etc.) because of their direct college experiences (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Such findings indicate the potent role of parental education beyond the effects on income.

A notable body of literature has established that parents can play a key role in a student's college enrollment and success. Students' degree aspirations are significantly related to whether their parents have a bachelor's degree (Terenzini et. al, 1996). For example, during the sophomore year of high school, expectations to earn a bachelor's degree were more than double for students with two parents who have earned a bachelor's degree, as compared with first-generation college students (78 percent versus 36 percent) (Volle & Federico, 1997). One study reported that parental involvement increases the likelihood of meeting the minimal qualifications for college admission by 18% (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). Another study concluded that once a student is enrolled in college,

commitment to the degree and ultimately persistence were affected by the level of parental belief that the student would succeed (Hackman & Dysinger, 1970).

Social reproduction

The study of parental education may be especially compelling given that it is not only vital in students' college enrollment and success, but also has broader social implications: conferring social class and status across generations (Powell & Steelman, 1995). For first-generation students, college education is "a cultural asset critical in social mobility" (McDonough, 1997). In fact, first-generation students expressed more interest in improving their financial and professional status than non-first generation students (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students also indicated a stronger commitment to giving their children better opportunities for the future in comparison to their non-first-generation counterparts (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

Objectives

Despite the compelling research that has demonstrated the hurdles that first-generation students must overcome and the importance of understanding the implications of parental education on social mobility, student differences across multiple levels of parental education (beyond a first-generation/non-first generation dichotomy) have, for the most part, been overlooked.

The goal of this study is to explore and compare the experiences and views that community college students face across multiple levels of parental education. Community colleges are an ideal setting in which to examine these issues given that community colleges are well recognized for their diverse student population, encompassing students

from a wide range of backgrounds (including parental education levels), educational aspirations, and professional interests. Within this broad pool, first-generation students are most highly represented, with over 50 percent of all first-generation college students attending a local community college (Littleton, 1998; Philippe & Valiga, 2000; Volle & Federico, 1997).

Methodology

Sample

The sample for this study is drawn from 5,000 students from the nine campuses of the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). LACCD comprises a culturally and economically diverse urban population which makes this study an especially interesting one in examining how different parental education levels shape community college students' experiences. Moreover, LACCD is one of the largest community college districts in the United States and serves more than 100,000 students.

Information regarding student backgrounds, activities, goals, and views was collected by the Transfer and Retention of Urban Community College Students (TRUCCS) project during Spring 2001. The 47-item questionnaire was developed to reflect issues specific to community college students, based on the extant literature (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Behrs & Smith, 1991; de los Santos & Wright 1990; Hagedorn & Castro, 1999; McCormick & Carroll, 1997; Moss & Young, 1995). The 241 participating classrooms were identified by way of stratified random sampling based on three levels of English courses (2 levels below transfer, 1 level below transfer, and transfer level); occupational programs stratified by gender, remedial courses, regular courses, learning communities,

and traditional gateway courses. The validity of the sampling design was assessed by comparing the sample to the entire LACCD population on a number of factors, including ethnicity, primary language, and age. The sample was deemed highly representative of the district's population (Hagedorn, et al, 2002).

Variables and Analytic Procedures

The variable of interest for this study responds to the question, "What is the highest level of formal education obtained by your parents in either the U.S. or in another foreign country?" The 10 response options were collapsed into 5 categories in order to maintain adequate sample sizes and draw meaningful comparisons by multiple levels of parental education. The final categories were: (1) "junior high school or less," (2) "high school," (3) "community college," (4) "four-year college," and (5) "graduate school." These categories were based on the highest education of either parent. For example, if a student's mother completed her education at a four-year college whereas the father never went beyond a high school education, the student's parental education was noted as "four-year college." If a student did not indicate her mother's education level for whatever reason and indicated her father's education as having attended some graduate school, the student's parental education was noted as "graduate school."

We began by with analyses of variance (ANOVAS) equations in order to compare differences between students of different parental education levels (ranging from junior high school to graduate school). For descriptive purposes, parental education levels were compared by income and race. Previous research has found that the largest differences between first-generation and traditional students were on levels of family income and race

(Terenzini et al, 1994). Thus, this study observed how income and race were distributed across multiple parental education levels.

Next, we constructed five logistic regression equations in order to understand which aspects of students' experiences and views reflect parental education level after controlling for students' background characteristics (see Appendix A for complete variable list and coding). Four of the dependent variables were designated to distinguish a particular level of parental education from the level directly above or below it. These variables are: *Junior High versus High School*, *High School versus Community College*, *Community College versus Four-Year College*, and *Four-Year versus Graduate School*. In addition, we included a fifth dependent variable—*First Generation Status versus Non-First Generation Status*—in order to assess how student characteristics relate to this more commonly used dichotomy.

Student background characteristics included *High School GPA*, seven dichotomous variables of ethnicity (*Black/African American*, *Mexican/Mexican American*, *Latino/a*, *North Asian*, *South Asian*, *Pacific Islander* and *Asian Indian*), and *Income*. These background variables were included as control measures. It was especially important to include race and income as many of the obstacles that first-generation students face are often intricately tied to these two aspects (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Philippe & Valiga, 2000). Thus, we included these variables to identify obstacles among students of multiple parental education levels independent of race and income.

Students' experiences and views were primarily selected based on findings from previous research about first-generation students (Arredondo, 1999; Astin, 1984; Choy, Horn, Nunez & Chen, 2000; London, 1996; Mitchell, 1997; Nuñez, & Cuccaro-Alamin,

1998; Rendon, 1995; Terenzini et. al, 1994; Tinto, 1987; Tinto, 1993; Volle & Federico, 1997). These variables included the following ten student experience variables: *Working as the Primary Wage Earner, Skipped Class, Using Email or Internet for Homework, Hours per Week: Work at a job; Hours per Week: Housework/Childcare, Hours per Week: Watching TV, Hours per Week: Spending Time on Campus, Hours per Week: Talking with Students about Non-School Related Things, Hours per Week: Studying Alone at Home and Hours Per Week: Studying Alone in the College Library* (See Appendix for Complete Variable List and Coding). The following two behavioral factors were also added: *Interacting with Instructors/Staff (Talking with Instructor Outside of Class, Talking with Instructor During Office Hours, Speak with an Academic Counselor, Ask the Instructor Questions, and Speak Up During Class; Alpha = .76)* and *Studying with Other Students (Helping Another Student Understand Homework, Study in Small Groups, Phone or Email Students about Studies, Hours per Week: Study with Students in This Course, Hours per Week Studying with Students in Other Courses; Alpha = .74)*. Eight variables reflecting students' views were *Difficulty Understanding the English Language, Grades are a Reflection of Learning, Difficulty Because of My Race, Difficulty Meeting Deadlines, Nervous about Attending College, Family More Important Than Career, Feelings of Belonging at the College, Starting an Assignment a Day Before its Due*. Two additional ideational factors were *Determined and Confident (Expect to Do Well, Understand What is Taught, Complete Homework, Keep Trying Even When Frustrated, Finish Courses in Program of Study, Determined to Reach Goals, Success is Due to Effort, Can Learn Skills Taught in Course, Satisfaction with Working Hard; Alpha = .84)* and *Expecting Obstacles*

(Expecting Parking, Transportation, Family Responsibilities, Job Responsibilities, Paying for College, Scheduling Classes, and Difficulty of Classes to be a Problem; Alpha = .71).

Findings

ANOVA results indicate mostly significant income differences across levels of parental education, as would be expected (See Table 1). Findings further indicate that compared to parents with a high school education, the average income for parents with a junior high school education was \$3,589 less. Compared to parents with a community college education, the average income for parents with a high school education was \$928 less. The average income for parents with a four-year college degree, however, was \$3,748 more than the average income of community college educated parents. The mean income difference between parents attending four-year colleges versus graduate school was \$485, but not significant. This finding demonstrates that the traditional first-generation versus non-first generation income split may not be appropriate when considering community college students. Rather, greater income disparities exist between junior high versus high school and community college versus four-year college.

[Insert Table 1]

ANOVA results also indicate significantly different proportions of minority students across parental education levels (see Table 2). The greatest proportion of Latino and Mexican American students¹ were of junior high school levels of parental education or

¹ Racial groups were aggregated for the purposes of group mean comparison. N Black/African American = 534; N Asian Indian (Arab, Asian Indian) = 189; N Latino (Central American; South American; Other

less; the greatest proportion of African American/Black students were of community college levels of parental education; the greatest proportion of North Asian students were of four-year college levels of parental education; the greatest proportion of Islander students were of four-year and graduate school level of parental education; the greatest proportion of White students were of graduate school levels of parental education. The distribution of South Asian and Asian Indian students was relatively similar, particularly across community college, four-year college, and graduate school levels of parental education. As demonstrated, Latino and Mexican American students are most likely to be of first-generation status; while the greatest proportion of these students had parents with a junior high school level of education or less. As the ANOVA findings have pointed out, each parental education group is comprised differently, at least according to income and race, challenging notions of parental education as a continuum.

[Insert Table 2]

Logistic Regression Findings

Results of the logistic regression analyses are presented in Table 3. Included in the table are the significant logistic regression coefficients and standard errors for All (First Generation vs. Non-First Generation Parental Education), Group A (Junior High School vs. High School Parental Education), Group B (High School vs. Community College Parental Education), Group C (Community College vs. 4-Year College Parental Education), and Group D (Graduate School vs. 4 Year College Parental Education).

Latino/Hispanic) = 801; N Mexican (Mexican, Chicano) = 1,304; N North Asian (Chinese, Korean, Japanese) = 297; N South Asian (Cambodian, Laotian, Thai, Vietnamese); Pacific Islander (Filipino, Samoan, Hawaiian, Guamanian, Other Pacific Islander) = 775; Caucasian/White = 634.

[Insert Table 3]

Among the 36 independent variables examined, 17 independent measures were shown to significantly enter at least one of the logistic regression analyses. Almost all of the variables that significantly entered the first regression (column 1) also entered at least one of the other regressions (columns 2, 4, 6, and 8). None of the significant variables in the first regression, moreover, showed to be significant in all the remaining regressions. In other words, among the variables in this study, no single variable that significantly predicts whether a student is first generation also predicts each of the other levels of parental education.

For the regression analysis comparing first-generation versus non-first generation parental education, five race variables, *Income*, and *High School GPA* significantly entered the equation. More specifically, being *Mexican/Mexican American* or *Latino/a* is positively related to being a First-Generation student in the community colleges, whereas being *Black/African American*, *Pacific Islander*, or *Asian Indian* is positively related to being a non-First-Generation student. First generation students also tend to lower *income* and lower *high school GPAs*, serve as the *primary wage earner*, believe that *grades reflect learning*, felt *nervous about entering college*, yet now feel that they *belong at the college* and encounter *difficulty understanding English Language*. This latter finding may reflect the disproportionately high number of international students taking coursework in the Los Angeles community colleges. Even so, first-generation students overall tend to feel that although they *initially were nervous about entering college*, they *do feel that they belong*. It is important to note that these views are significantly related to being of first-generation

status regardless of students' *race, income*, and all the other independent variables in the equations.

While such findings fairly are consistent with previous literature about first generation students, perhaps more interesting are the different sets of significant predictors across levels of parental education. According to the findings for Group A, race distinguishes between high school-educated parents and junior high school educated parents as follows: *Black/ African American* students are more positively predict parents who attended high school, while *Mexican/ Mexican American* and *Latino/a* students positively junior high school educated parents. Also, believing that the *difficulties they encounter are due to their race* are traits more common among junior high school educated parents. The findings for Group B, on the other hand, show that being *Black/ African American, Pacific Islander, or Asian Indian* is positively associated with community college (versus high school) parental education, while being *Mexican/Mexican American* and encountering *difficulty in their classes* and *believing that grades reflect learning* relate to high school parental education. The distinct student qualities found when disaggregating levels of first generation status show that each of these parental education groups notably differ in comparison to the others.

The findings are just as convincing for Group C, comparing four-year college versus community college parental education. As shown in Table 2, students whose parents attended four-year institutions (versus community colleges) tend be *North Asian* and face *difficulty understanding English*, whereas students whose parents stopped at the community college tend to be *Mexican/ Mexican American* and serve as the *primary wage earner*. For Group D, having a parent who attended graduate school (versus four-year

college) is related to a higher *high school GPA* but greater *difficulty with their classes*.

Students whose parents stopped at the four-year college tend to be *North Asian*. They tend to encounter *difficulty with the English language* but do not perceive the *difficulty of their classes as major obstacles*. Such findings suggest that although four-year parental educated students may have greater lower *high school GPAs* in comparison to graduate school parental educated students, their lower grades are likely attributable to difficulties with English and not necessarily due to difficulties with the courses. One explanation might be that more students whose parents attend four-year colleges are comprised of international students in comparison to students whose parents attended graduate school.

Overall, the findings of this study show that the predictors of first generation status differ when disaggregating parental education levels. Distinguishing characteristics differ when comparing within and across these multiple levels as no similar pattern was found across the five logistic regressions.

Conclusion and Limitations

The findings of this study demonstrate significant differences in students' views and experiences across different levels of parental education, arguing that future research should similarly expand current notions of parental education beyond a binary comparison (having a college-educated parent or not). Previous studies presume that the views and experiences of first-generation students are homogeneous. This study extends beyond previous research by comparing students from multiple parental education levels. This study also examined parental education categorically. The findings clearly indicate that the views and experiences of these students do not relate linearly to levels of parental education.

This study does, however, include some limitations. First, this study solely examined students in the Los Angeles community college district. One can only infer that such differences also exist for community college students in other regions. Second, this study was derived from a large database that was not designed specifically to examine the research question in this study. Thus, this study could have benefited from additional measures that examined a broader range of issues related to parental education levels, such as whether the student still lived with one or both parents and which parent had a greater influence on the students' educational experience. Given this lack of contextual information, parental education categories were determined solely by the highest level of education achieved by either parent. Moreover, this study did not produce an exhaustive list of all the possible views and experiences that can be differentiated by parental education levels. However, this study does make clear that parental education ought to be understood in terms of distinct categories, rather than as a dichotomy (first generation or not). Also, each parental education group possesses views and experiences that cannot simply be linearly scaled by education levels.

Future research should further explore the possibly distinct experiences for students coming from each of these parental education levels, particularly at other types of institutions in other regions. Whether there are unique distinctions across multiple parental education levels for students in four-year colleges, for example, remains unknown. Moreover, the findings of this study can be further explored by way of qualitative inquiry. In-depth interviews, for instance, can provide much deeper meanings and interpretations about the differences this study has already uncovered.

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Table 1.

Average Yearly Income among Levels of Parental Education.

	JHEP (N=958)	HSEP (N=979)	CCEP (N=619)	FYED (N=612)	GSEP (N=490)
Income	\$21,533	\$25,122	\$26,050	\$29,798	\$30,283
Difference from Group Just Above It	\$3,589*	\$928*	\$3,748*	\$485	N/A

*p<.05

Table 2.

Students' Race Across Parental Education Levels (in percentages).

	JHEP	HSEP	CCEP	FYED	GSEP
White/Caucasian	.03	.14	.21	.25	.28
Black/African American	.03	.15	.25	.19	.15
Asian Indian	.01	.04	.06	.06	.06
Latino/a	.27	.22	.17	.16	.18
Mexican/Mexican American	.62	.35	.25	.14	.11
North Asian	.03	.08	.07	.15	.08
Pacific Islander	.01	.02	.05	.10	.10
South Asian	.01	.02	.03	.03	.02

Note: Decimals were rounded to the hundredth.

Table 3.

Summary of Logistic Regression Analyses for Significant Variables Predicting ParentalLevels of Education.

Variables	All (1 st Gen vs. Other)		Group A (JH vs. HS)		Group B (HS vs. CC)		Group C (CC vs. 4YR)		Group D (4YR vs. GS)	
	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.	B	S.E.
Black/African American	.34	.15	1.07	.31	.46	.20	-.39	.20	-.35	.22
Mexican/Mexican American	-.146	.11	-1.36	.17	-.36	.16	-.76	.19	-.45	.24
Latino/a	-.74	.12	-.86	.18	-.31	.18	-.14	.20	-.07	.21
North Asian	.16	.17	.41	.29	-.04	.26	.54	.26	-1.08	.26
Pacific Islander	1.68	.28	.69	.60	1.30	.36	.27	.27	-.04	.25
Asian Indian	1.23	.25	.95	.55	.82	.30	.08	.27	-.10	.30
Income	.12	.02	.07	.03	.06	.03	.06	.04	.02	.04
High School GPA	.06	.02	-.01	.03	.03	.04	.01	.04	.09	.04
Primary Wage Earner	-.21	.10	-.19	.13	.02	.13	-.31	.15	.13	.17
Skip Class	.11	.05	.07	.08	.13	.07	-.03	.08	.00	.08
Hours per Week: Watch TV	.06	.03	.03	.04	.03	.04	.01	.05	.06	.05
Problem: Understanding	-.20	.06	-.12	.07	-.20	.09	-.08	.10	.22	.10
English										
Grades Reflect Learning	-.08	.02	-.01	.03	-.08	.03	-.07	.04	.12	.04
Difficulties due to My Race	-.03	.03	-.11	.03	.02	.04	-.03	.04	.04	.04
Difficulty meeting Deadlines	-.02	.03	-.03	.04	-.04	.04	.09	.04	-.12	.05
Was Nervous about College	-.06	.02	-.01	.03	-.02	.03	-.03	.03	-.06	.04
Feel I Belong at this College	-.09	.03	-.02	.04	-.06	.04	-.02	.05	-.05	.05

Note: 1st Gen=First Generation; JH=Junior High School; HS=High School; CC=Community College; 4YR=Four-Year College; GS=Graduate School.

p<.05; p<.01