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Self-Efficacy, Sense of Belonging, and Sense of Obligation in First Generation College Students

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Abstract

First generation college (FGC) students are people whose parents didn't earn a college degree (Stebbleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). FGC students may come from marginalized backgrounds, which may limit or hinder their higher education experience (Nuñez, 2009). Self-efficacy is necessary for FGC students to surpass the challenges they face, as those who feel less capable don't continue the pursuit of higher education. FGC students may feel like their demographics or the challenges they face are magnified by the salient stereotypes of their group identification (Wout, Danso, Jackson, & Spencer, 2008), which could then make them feel like they don't belong on college campuses. Also, FGC students, especially those of immigrant parents, may feel a high sense of obligation and high pressures to succeed academically because immigrant parents remain optimistic about the futures of their children and reinforce the importance of higher education (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). Of the 33 college students who participated in this study, 18 were FGC students. The Academic Self-Efficacy Measure (Byrne, Flood, & Griffin, 2014), the University Connectedness Scale (Stallman & Hurst, 2016), and the Respect for Family Measure (Fulgini, & Pedersen, 2002) were used to compare the experiences of FGC students to continuing generation college students. Results suggested that FGC students do feel a strong obligation to their family, and traditional aged FGC students have poorer self-efficacy than continuing generation college students. Our understanding of these differences could help foster a better experience for all students.

Keywords: First generation college, self-efficacy, academic self-efficacy, belonging, obligation.

Self-Efficacy, Sense Of Belonging, And Sense Of Obligation In First Generation College Students

First generation college (FGC) students are students whose parents haven't earned a college degree (Stebbleton, Soria, & Huesman, 2014). These students face greater academic challenges than continuing generation college students (Stebbleton et al., 2014; Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman & Williams, 2015). For example, FGC students may lack academic preparation to attend and succeed in higher education, they might not be able to afford higher education, and they may have to take fewer classes and need a flexible schedule to meet their other responsibilities (Bui, 2002). These challenges may be compounded by the intersection of first-generation status with other marginalized demographics. Some common characteristics of FGC students include holding low-income status, coming from ethnic minority backgrounds, having a single parent, being a non-native English speaker, and having immigrant parents or being an immigrant (Petty, 2014; Stebbleton et al., 2014). These disadvantages, commonly shared by FGC students, can hinder their academic success in higher education. In respect to these demographics, Nuñez (2009) listed possible barriers to college for these individuals as, "limited access to (a) K-12 coursework that provides academic preparation for college, (b) knowledge about the college experience, (c) college faculty who understand these students' cultural backgrounds, (d) financial aid, and (e) a feeling of security that students will be able to handle college expenses" (p. 46). These are just a few examples of characteristics and barriers that FGC students have to overcome in addition to the challenges commonly faced by college students.

Though FGC students have disadvantages toward achieving academic success, the number of FGC students enrolled in postsecondary institutions is rising, and in the past decade it

has been at an all-time high (Petty, 2014). The challenges faced by these students once they arrive on campus, however, may lead to poor levels of self-efficacy and a poor sense of belonging on campus, paired with an extra effect of possibly feeling high pressures to succeed due to a strong sense of obligation to their family because they are FGC students. Therefore, the goal of this study is to gain a greater understanding of how the challenges faced by FGC students, such as their self-efficacy, sense of belonging on campus, and sense of obligation to their family, produce a unique college experience.

Self-Efficacy

Typically, FGC students are at a disadvantage with respect to basic understanding of postsecondary education, family income and support, educational expectations, and academic preparation (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), indicating that the pathway to college is far from equal for all students (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). These challenges negatively affect FGC students, especially in their confidence in themselves to succeed academically. For example, FGC students feel like they needed to dedicate more time to studying than other students (Bui, 2002), which correlates with their lack of preparation. A lack of preparation and self-esteem contribute to their beliefs of inability (Petty, 2014). Therefore, the barriers, and perceived barriers, that FGC students cope with may affect not only their academic success, but their beliefs of succeeding. This perceived inadequacy corresponds with a student's self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is the belief about one's ability to perform particular tasks and have shown to be predictive of college students' pursuit of higher education (Tate et al., 2015). Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory argues that self-efficacy levels of motivation, affective states, and

actions highly affected by what people believe versus what is actually true (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). Therefore according to this theory, if a FGC student believes or perceives that he or she is inadequate or incapable of success then it will be challenging for him or her to succeed regardless of their actual ability. Self-efficacy can also be described as the belief in one's ability to learn and perform, which influences one's self-motivation (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). This lack of motivation and feeling of inadequacy influences a student's academic self-efficacy.

Motivation is an essential but complicated theme when dealing with students like FGC students. Petty (2014) argued that McClelland's Need for Achievement theory, which provides an understanding of factors related to motivation, is of great importance when studying concepts such as self-esteem, self-actualization, and self-efficacy because it identified that if a need is strong enough, it can motivate an individual to demonstrate behaviors necessary to accomplish the need regardless of their adversities and challenges (Petty, 2014). Therefore, though a FGC student is more likely to face adversities, he or she is capable of pushing through them via self-efficacy and motivation. In studying the self-efficacy and coping efficacy necessary for FGC students to surpass the challenges they face, it was found that those who feel less capable don't continue the pursuit of higher education (Tate et al., 2015). Though it is hard to say how FGC students should be motivated, Petty (2014) claimed it would be ideal to gain a greater understanding of this concept so that FGC students experience motives that influence their desire to succeed in their pursuit of higher education.

Sense of Belonging

The factors and challenges faced by FGC students add to their feelings of being different and not belonging on campus, possibly because of their marginalized backgrounds,

disadvantages, and lack of representation on campus. The transitions and changes that FGC students face may lead them to believe that they do not matter, which increases their belief that they do not belong at their higher education institution (Stebbleton et al., 2014). This is only compounded by the fact that FGC are more likely to be ethnic minority students, to come from a lower socioeconomic background, and to speak a language other than English at home (Bui, 2002) all of which are possible factors that would make them feel like they don't belong on campus. This is problematic because having a poor sense of belonging is similar to feeling like one does not matter, and feelings of mattering make an individual likely to be successful and persist toward graduation (Stebbleton et al., 2014).

The challenges that FGC students face can be detrimental to their academic success (Petty, 2014) because they create labels and stereotypes for FGC students. FGC students may feel like their demographics or the challenges they face are magnified by the salient stereotypes of their group identification (Wout, Danso, Jackson, & Spencer, 2008). That is, the sense of membership to their college community can weaken because of subtle exclusions on campus or because of marginalized experiences, isolation, and exposure to negative stereotypes (Nuñez, 2009). For example, students of color are aware that others might use their academic performance as proof that their social group lacks the competence needed to succeed (Wout et al., 2008). A perceived hostile environment, like one subjecting stereotypes to FGC students, has been found to be predict a poor sense of belonging (Nuñez, 2009). Consequently, FGC students are more likely to have marginalized experiences and challenges that would hinder not only their sense of belonging, but feelings of being capable of to succeed in higher education.

Pressures and Sense of Obligation

Regardless of the challenges, barriers, and adversities faced by FGC students, they may perceive a strong pressures to succeed and a high sense of obligation to their family because they are first to attain a degree in higher education. Bui (2002) found that the main reason FGC students sought to attain a degree in higher education was to gain respect, bring their family honor, and help their family financially after they've graduated. Though the experiences FGC students face in higher education are very personal and individualized, a sense of obligation and pressure to make their family proud is a common theme among this group of students. FGC students' motivations to succeed in higher education are also influenced by their cultural values (Dennis, Phinney, & Chauteco, 2005). These cross-cultural differences in the sense of obligation to their families add to a FGC student's differentiated higher education experience.

A subgroup of FGC students that feel a particularly high sense of obligation to their family are those that are children of immigrant parents. Though students of immigrant parents continue to generate national attention in respect to inequities in higher education, immigrant parents remain optimistic about the futures of their children and reinforce the importance of higher education for their children (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). For immigrant parents, the aspirations for their children to attain a degree goes hand-in-hand with the upward future they foresee for their children (Raleigh & Kao, 2010). There may then be a high sense of obligation and high pressures to succeed academically because of the known struggles their parents had to overcome and because of the influences of contextual attainment of educational achievement. FGC students feeling pressure to succeed and represent their families is just another challenge that they need to overcome.

The Present Study

While it has been demonstrated in the literature that FGC students face greater challenges and have more adversities to overcome than other students, surprisingly little is known about the comparison of the experiences between FGC students and continuing generation college students in terms of their self-efficacy, their sense of belonging on campus, and their sense of obligation to their family. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a greater understanding of FGC students experience in higher education and how they differentiate from continuing generation college students in their self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and sense of obligation to their family. I hypothesize that FGC students will have a poorer sense of belonging on campus, poorer self- efficacy, and a higher sense of obligation to their families than continuing generation college students.

Method

Participants

This study utilized a sample of 33 college students. Eligibility for this study included the ability to speak and read English and being enrolled in a 2-year college or 4-year university at an undergraduate level. The sample was 75.8% women. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 66 with a mean age of 31 ($SD = 8.931$). The majority of the sample identified as Hispanic/ Latino (36.4%), followed by White (33.3%), Asian America/ Pacific Islander (21.2%), African American (3%) and other (6.1%). Of the sample, 54.4% were FGC students, characterized by the education status of their parents. FGC students were those who self-reported that neither parent achieved a degree in higher education equivalent to a Bachelor's Degree. All participants were

notified of the voluntary nature of this study, and the university's Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol.

Measures

Self-efficacy. The Academic Self-Efficacy Measure, a self-report survey, was used to measure domain specific self-efficacy in the realm of scholastic performance. Byrne et al. (2014) developed this measure for use with a group of accounting students. The measure asks participants to rate their confidence in their ability to complete academic tasks such as meeting deadlines, comprehending lectures, producing best work in exams, and drawing a study plan (Byrne et al., 2014). Questions also address the social aspect of academia, for example, asking questions during lectures, explaining content to a friend, engaging in academic discussing with classmates, and asking for help from tutors (Byrne et al., 2014). This 26-item measure used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *not at all confident* to 7 = *confident all of the time*.

Sense of belonging. The University Connectedness Scale, previously used by Stallman & Hurst (2016), measured a student's sense of belonging to and support from their university. The University Connectedness Scale has a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .85$; Stallman & Hurst, 2016). The measure asks participant to rate experiences such interactions with staff and classmates, the diversity on campus, and their feelings of being welcomed and valued. The scale consists of 19 items on a 7-point Likert scale that measures if the statements apply to a student's experiences at university, ranging from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *all the time*. Half of the statements are reverse scored.

Sense of obligation. The Respect for Family Measure was used to measure students' sense of obligation to their family. Fuligni & Pedersen (2002) previously used this to measure

obligation in the transition from youth to young adulthood and claimed, “the measure had a good internal consistency ($\alpha = .76$) and had good reliabilities within each ethnic group ($\alpha = .60-.80$)” (p. 859). The measure asks participants to rate the importance of treating their family with respect, doing what is asked of them, and making sacrifices (Fuligni & Pedersen, 2002). This 7-item measure used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *not important at all* to 5 = *very important*.

Demographics. Aside from the questions asked in the three measures listed above, questions about a student's demographics were asked as well. Students were asked their age, gender, ethnicity, whether they attend a 2-year college or 4-year university, whether that institution is public or private, and their class standing based on the units they had completed. To determine whether or not students were FGC students, participants were asked whether they consider themselves a FGC student or not. Then they were asked to provide the highest level of education their parents had received. The structure of the questions allowed for the student to answer about their parents, however respondents with just one parent could just answer about that one parent. Those with more than 2 parents were asked to choose the 2 parents that they spend the most time with. The options of education level of their parents included *some high school, high school graduate or equivalent, Vocational/ Technical degree or some college, 4-year university degree/ Bachelor's degree, or Graduate/ Professional degree*. Participants with both parents having less than a 4-year university/ Bachelor's degree were categorized as FGC students and those with one or more parent with a 4-year university/ Bachelor's degree or higher were classified as continuing generation college students.

Procedure

Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that it consisted of completing a survey consisting of demographic questions and questionnaires designed to measure academic confidence and feelings about their institution and family. Surveys were distributed online via email and Facebook posts, containing a link which directed individuals to a secure survey-based website. The survey took about 5 to 10 minutes to complete.

Results

In order to compare self-efficacy, connectedness with campus, and sense of obligation to families amongst FGC students and continuing generation college students three independent-samples t tests were conducted to compare the means of the two groups. Three participants who were graduate level students were excluded from this analyses.

An independent-samples t test was calculated comparing the mean scores of FGC students and continuing generation college students on their academic self- efficacy. It was hypothesized that FGC students would have poorer self-efficacy than continuing generation college students. A marginally significant difference between the two groups was found ($t(31) = -1.1774, p = 0.086$) such that FGC students had generally lower self-efficacy. The mean of FGC students ($m = 4.932, sd = 0.843$) was slightly lower than the mean of continuing generation college students ($m = 5.526, sd = 1.081$).

A second independent-samples t test was calculated comparing the mean scores of FGC students and continuing generation college students on the sense of belongingness and connectedness to campus. No significant difference was found ($t(31) = -1.036, p > 0.05$). It was hypothesized that FGC students would have a poorer sense of belongingness on campus than

continuing generation college students, however, it was found that there is difference between generation statuses on feelings of belongingness on campus. See table 1.

A third independent-samples *t* test comparing the mean scores of the FGC students and continuing generation college students was conducted to test the hypothesis that FGC students would have a higher sense of obligation to their family than continuing generation college students. Because of missing data, only 32 student participants were used for this analysis, rather than 33. There was a significant difference between the means of the two groups in their sense of obligation to their family in the hypothesized direction ($t(30) = 2.420, p = 0.022$). Thus, results suggests that FGC students feel higher senses of obligation ($m = 4.224, sd = 0.551$) than continuing generation college students ($m = 3.667, sd = 0.751$).

Supplemental analyses was conducted in order to examine the relationships of self-efficacy, connectedness of campus, and sense of obligation to families amongst FGC students and continuing generation college students in traditionally aged college students. Therefore, 4 participants older than the age of 30 were excluded from these analyses, as well as the 3 participants who were graduate level students. Analyses were conducted a second time using just this subsample of participants.

An independent-samples *t* test was calculated comparing the mean scores of FGC students and continuing generation college students on their academic self-efficacy in traditionally aged college students. In this subsample there was a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(27) = -2.405, p = 0.023$) such that the mean of FGC students ($m = 4.923, sd = 0.869$) was significantly lower than the mean of continuing generation college

students ($m = 5.708$, $sd = 1.862$). Thus, results indicate that FGC students have a poorer academic self-efficacy.

Next, an independent-samples t test was calculated comparing the mean scores of FGC students and continuing generation college students on the sense of belongingness and connectedness to campus in traditionally aged college students. No significant difference was found ($t(27) = -0.937$, $p > 0.05$). Again, it was found that there is no connection between generation status and feelings of belongingness on campus. See table 2.

A final independent-samples t test comparing the mean scores of the FGC students and continuing generation college students was conducted to test the hypothesis that FGC students would have a higher sense of obligation to their family than continuing generation college students. In traditionally aged college students, a marginally significant difference between the two groups was found ($t(27) = 1.888$, $p = 0.07$). The mean of FGC students was slightly higher ($m = 4.229$, $sd = 0.568$) than the mean of continuing generation college students ($m = 3.779$, $sd = 0.716$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand differences between FGC students and continuing generation college students, specifically in their academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging on campus, and sense of obligation to their family. It was hypothesized that FGC students would have poorer academic self-efficacy, a poorer sense of belonging on campus, and a higher sense of obligation to their family. Findings indicate that FGC students feel a higher and stronger sense of obligation to their family than continuing generation college students and FGC

students under the age of 30 have poorer academic self-efficacy than continuing generation college students.

In analyzing academic self-efficacy, results suggested a marginally significant difference between FGC students and continuing generation college students. However, among the traditionally-aged college students in this sample, there was a significant between FGC students and continuing generation college students such that FGC students reported a poorer sense of academic self-efficacy than continuing generation college students. These results correspond with past research in that FGC students may not have the same resources and experiences as continuing generation college students, which affects their self-efficacy and perceived ability to succeed academically (Pascarella et al., 2004). Self-efficacy is of great importance because this highlights and mirrors a student's motivation, self-actualization, self-esteem, and the overall feeling of being capable of success in the classroom setting (Tate et al., 2015). A student needs a positive view of his or her capability and therefore FGC students may need more support in this aspect of their college experience. Because self-efficacy could be influenced by the environment around you, it is crucial for a student to be surrounded by those who believe in them. A positive perceived self-efficacy will coincide with an environment that enables growth and inspiration to succeed academically.

In analyzing sense of belonging on campus, results suggested that there are no significant differences between FGC students and continuing generation college students. This does not support the hypothesis nor previous research. Previous research suggested that the issues and challenges faced by students who are first in their families to pursue a college degree often involve transitions and changes that lead them to believe that they do not matter, which

increases their belief that they do not belong at universities (Stebleton et al., 2014). However, the results from this study don't correspond with this statement. These results suggest that regardless of being first generation or not, the participants felt a similar sense of belonging and mattering. There are many factors that may have affected the results in sense of belonging on campus. The most positive interpretation would be that the students in this study, in fact, feel like they matter on campus and that their generation status has not been a salient factor in their college experience. Feeling like you belong and matter on campus is of great importance for a college student to thrive academically and personally.

In comparing sense of obligation to family, results suggested that FGC students do feel a higher sense of obligation than continuing generation college students. However, when the sample was limited to just traditionally-aged college students, there was only a marginally significant difference. This isn't surprising because being the first in your family to achieve higher education could instill a substantial amount of pressure and obligation to make your family proud. Bui (2002) found that the main reason FGC students sought to attain a degree in higher education was to gain respect, bring their family honor, and help their family financially after they've graduated. The results from this study suggest that FGC students take on that role, which correlates with the amount of pressure and obligation FGC students perceive. Understanding a FGC students' sense of obligation is important because sometimes too much pressure could be detrimental to their stress levels.

The perceived pressure to succeed and make one's family proud might become too strong if you are first in your family to achieve higher education. FGC students may have an emphasized expectation to fulfill obligations to the family that conflict with college

responsibilities, however, parents continue to remain optimistic about the futures of their FGC students futures (Dennis et al., 2005). The optimism could either push a student to succeed in a positive manner, or it might excessive and detrimental to their academic success. Tate et al. (2015) found that FGC students have expressed desire to honor their families through their educational and career pursuits, but it is important to understand the extent of which FGC students will push themselves to honor their family.

A posteriori, a supplementary analysis was done to understand the academic self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and sense of obligation in FGC under the age of 30. This was done to compare FGC students and continuing generation college students of a more traditional college age. This afterthought arose when trying to understand why the initial analysis didn't correspond with the hypotheses of this study. The comparison between all participants and participants under the age of 30 is novel to the literature.

There are several limitations of this study that should be taken into consideration in analyzing the results and before making generalizations. First, the sample size of the study was small, 33 participants in the first analysis and 29 participants in the supplementary analysis in traditionally-aged college students. Another limitation is that most of the recruitment was done via Facebook. According to the statistics provided by Facebook, the average age of Facebook users is 40.5 years old. This limitation may be the leading cause for why the age range of the participants of this study is older than the traditional age for undergraduate college students. Recruitment via another form of social media may have attracted a younger, more traditionally aged population.

One important consideration that limits the generalizability of these findings is that the sample was predominantly from the California Bay Area. This population is very diverse, including students from many different backgrounds such as holding low-income status, coming from ethnic minority backgrounds, having a single parent, being a non-native English speaker, having immigrant parents or being immigrants themselves. Being such a diverse community may mean that universities have already implemented resources and a welcoming environment for FGC students, which strongly influences the results of this research. This strong regional focus does not give us a clear understanding about other areas of California that are not as diverse. Another aspect of a diverse community indicates the emergence of many cultures, cultures that stand on the importance of family and unity. Family values impact and influence students, which then corresponds to their sense of obligation to their family (Wout et al., 2008). It is highly possible that this sense of obligation is a cultural factor, creating a cultural bias (Nuñez, 2009). Future studies should explore a variety of cultures and have participants from various communities.

The findings of this study provide a useful foundation for future research. For instance, future research should consider the academic status in terms of their grade point average (GPA) of students to understand how self-efficacy, belongingness, and sense of obligation influence academic success. This could help understand if these three measures are predictors of academic performance. Also, future research could look for correlations between a students' sense of belonging on campus to the university campus climate. Another direction for future research would be to survey a broader population. As previously mentioned, this research solely found the

results of students in the Bay Area, California, and so future research should branch out to universities around the world to fully understand cross-cultural differences in all three measures.

FGC students face unique challenges and experience college differently from continuing generation college students (Stebbleton et al., 2014). FGC students may need particular resources to help adjust and feel capable of succeeding. A strong sense of belonging on campus is important, therefore the climate of the university campus is important in the experience of a FGC students. A welcoming, cultured campus with peer support is ideal, helping these students feel like they matter and deserve to be their, regardless of their possibly marginalized backgrounds (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014). In addition, given that FGC students feel a strong sense of obligation to their family, additional support should be provided for those who may feel too much pressure to make their family proud. Embracing, encouraging, and assisting students in coping with the unique stressors of being a FGC students is the epitome of an enriching higher education experience and could help bridge the gap between FGC students and continuing generation college students.

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Table 1. Academic self-efficacy ($N = 33$), sense of belongingness on campus ($N = 33$), and sense of obligation to family ($N = 32$) by generation status.

		Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Academic Self-Efficacy				-1.774	0.085
	First Generation	4.9316	0.8433		
	Continuing Generation	5.5256	1.0808		
Sense of Belonging on Campus				-1.036	0.308
	First Generation	5.1235	0.9773		
	Continuing Generation	5.4695	0.9273		
Sense of Obligation to Family				2.420	.022*
	First Generation	4.2238	0.551		
	Continuing Generation	3.6673	0.7509		

Table 2. Academic self-efficacy ($N= 29$), sense of belongingness on campus ($N= 29$), and sense of obligation to family ($N= 29$) by generation status in traditionally aged college students under the age of 30.

		Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Academic Self-Efficacy				-2.405	0.023*
	First Generation	4.923	0.869		
	Continuing Generation	5.708	0.863		
Sense of Belonging on Campus				-0.937	0.357
	First Generation	5.186	0.969		
	Continuing Generation	5.517	0.888		
Sense of Obligation to Family				1.888	0.07
	First Generation	4.229	0.568		
	Continuing Generation	3.779	0.716		