

Louis V. Macias reminds us that educators' attitudes toward first-generation students have a great impact on their eventual success ... or failure. Are you serving the best interests of your students with an inspirational, success-oriented mind-set that considers all of their capabilities?

By Louis V. Macias

# Choosing Success: A Paradigm for Empowering First-Generation College Students

**T**HERE HAVE BEEN TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE in my educational experience—those who have told me I can succeed and those who have told me I cannot.

One of my earliest and most important detractors was my fourth-grade teacher. Following a year riddled with visits to the principal's office for an assortment of class disruptions, I was placed in a fifth-grade class intended exclusively for students who were not expected to graduate from high school. So we acted the part, misbehaving so badly that our fifth-grade teacher nearly resigned midway through the school year. Students like myself who had caused disruptions previously were absolute terrors that year. Looking back, I realize that I was not in a dropout prevention program. Rather, I was in a dropout *training* program.

Thankfully, the other kind of people—those who told me I could succeed—began emerging that very year. My fifth-grade teacher personally drove me home following an afterschool fight I was involved in, and actually expressed disappointment at my behavior instead of expectation of it. My grades had always been above average, and he promised to have me placed in one of the mainstream classes if I committed to improving my behavior. His teaching assistant took the time to discover the impact that my parents' divorce was having on me. As a result, I started feeling like I could meet the challenge my mother, who had passionately opposed my fifth-grade placement, had delivered at the beginning of the year: "This is where you are, Louie. You can either prove them right, or you can prove them wrong." I spent the latter half of that year in a mainstream classroom. I was not sent to the principal's office once.

# I argue that adequately supporting first-generation students is largely dependent on the mind-sets of the faculty and administrators who are charged with nurturing their success.

Since that time, I have continued to be blessed with other remarkable people who have expressed belief in my capacity to succeed. Today I am a higher education professional who supports first-generation college students who, like me, are the first in their families to attend college. It is extremely rewarding work. However, I have found that they are often subjected to a similar dichotomy with respect to success that I experienced. That is, as educators, we think and do things that can both inspire and inhibit the prospects of success for these students.

My goal here is to frame the kind of vision and perspective that are required to inspire success among first-generation college students. I first consider the implications of adopting a deficit-based orientation with respect to first-generation college students. Next, I argue that adequately supporting first-generation students is largely dependent on the mind-sets of the faculty and administrators who are charged with nurturing their success. Finally, I offer a theoretical lens through which practitioners can ensure that they are consistently serving the best interests of all students, including first-generation college students.

## THE DEFICIT APPROACH TO FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

AT A RECENT CONFERENCE PRESENTATION, in order to highlight practitioner perspectives about first-generation college students, I asked a room of higher education professionals to call out nouns, verbs, or adjectives they associated with these students, which I wrote down on a whiteboard. Toward the conclusion of the presentation, I reviewed each of the 50 or so words with the audience and circled those with a negative connotation. Some of the words, such

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as “clueless,” drew uncomfortable shifts in chairs for their overt harshness, while others, such as “minority” and “immigrant,” yielded the same because they brought to light some of the more common stereotypes of first-generation students. When we had finished going through the entire list, an overwhelming number of words had been circled. For every positive word such as “accomplished,” “appreciative,” and “hardworking,” there were five others such as “entitled,” “unrealistic expectations,” “confused,” and “unsophisticated.”

Deficit-oriented perspectives such as these are not limited to the realm of practitioners. Most of the research on first-generation college students has likewise focused on what is wrong with them. A simple search of “first-generation college students” on many educational databases will highlight deficits ranging from lack of academic engagement and motivation to low self-esteem. According to a report by Xianglei Chen and C. Dennis Carroll for the National Center for Education Statistics, first-generation college students are more likely to come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and less likely to be academically prepared for college, be satisfied with their major, and ultimately graduate. Further, first-generation students earn lower GPAs and repeat more courses than their peers. As a result, statistically speaking, even those first-generation students who actually do graduate take longer to do so than their continuing-generation counterparts.

Findings such as these are important, make no mistake about that. As practitioners and researchers alike, it is critical for us to fully understand the challenges that first-generation students face. However, a perpetual focus on deficits and gaps has caused us to expect deficiency. It is the norm, so much so that words like “poor” and “uneducated” come to mind before “family-oriented” and “determined” when we think about these students. Understood this way, it is logical to conclude that a deficit-oriented mind-set with respect to first-generation students will yield deficit-oriented solutions.

Retention-focused approaches and strategies that are overly preoccupied with deficiencies stretch well beyond the confines of a single classroom or particular department. First-generation students are

less academically prepared, so we must offer tutorial services. First-generation college students are less likely to be satisfied with their chosen major, so we must offer career-planning services. For other students, these services are a proverbial cushion just in case support is needed on their journey toward success. However, for first-generation students these services are provided explicitly to prevent failure, and that is the problem. Our strategies are reactionary, predictable, and safe. They lack the creativity and inspiration that first-generation students need to fully realize the benefits of a postsecondary education.

In his book on leadership entitled *Deep Change*, Robert E. Quinn presents the following four dimensions of empowerment: a sense of meaning, a sense of competence, a sense of self-determination, and a sense of impact. This characterization of empowerment is particularly instructive when applied to first-generation students, most of all because it highlights how the deficit approach undermines each of these dimensions. For example, in order to promote a sense of competence, one must “feel confident about their ability to do the work; they know they can perform” (p. 225). As we have discussed, the deficit approach produces interventions largely focused on real and perceived gaps in performance. Given that, how likely is it that a sense of competence can be cultivated in a deficit-rich environment riddled with constant reminders of all that can go wrong?

Another application of Quinn’s dimensions of empowerment is evident with respect to instilling a sense of impact, “the feeling that one has influence in their unit” (p. 225). The journey of first-generation college students is an incredibly inspirational one, filled with big dreams and a great deal of individual perseverance. Yet when they arrive at higher education institutions across the United States each fall semester, we do not celebrate their remarkable achievements. Instead, albeit with good intentions, we implement retention strategies that offer the promise of preventing failure. If and when these students graduate four years later, we structure our interventions such that *we* are the reason for success. As a result, we inadvertently rob students of a sense of impact, a feeling of influence.

It could be said that my fifth-grade placement helped me. Cynics might claim success is ultimately what matters, the bottom line. After all, I participated

in a dropout prevention program and did not drop out; in fact, I went on to graduate from college and will soon earn a doctoral degree. From a programmatic standpoint, I represent an ideal outcome, the kind that ends up in glossy brochures. It is the kind of outcome that legitimizes a program, strategy, or approach, and convinces us we know exactly where all of the fires are.

The reality is, however, that the program did not help me. I did not achieve because of it; I achieved in spite of it. It threatened to drown both my academic achievement and sense of self-worth and, if not for my own resolve and the heroism of some remarkable people in my life, it might have succeeded.

To be fair, I truly believe that programs, strategies, and approaches for supporting the success of first-generation college students are developed with good intentions. There are no villains in this work. However, we must actively and consciously reject the temptation to use what we know about first-generation students as a justification for adopting a *Scared Straight* approach to educating them. Instead of cultivating a fear of failure through deficit-oriented perspectives, we must choose to emphasize a capacity for and expectation of success.

## CHOOSING SUCCESS FOR FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS

ON THE SURFACE, CHOOSING SUCCESS FOR FIRST-GENERATION students is a risk, in that it requires us to shift our focus away from a rather compelling array of data points warning of a proclivity to fail. It challenges our intuition, common sense, and inclination to help students. To choose success, we have to reject our overwhelming urge to stamp out the fires we are convinced are there.

For example, one of the words that came up during my aforementioned presentation was “stubborn.” I asked the professional who offered it to clarify what he meant by the word. He explained that many of the first-generation students he had worked with were resistant to help, waiting until the very last minute to seek it out. “Stubborn” was circled in red given its clearly negative slant. Later, during a discussion about the words, I asked participants to reconceptualize the circled words to reverse their negative connotation. One by one we made our conversions. “Poor” became “grateful.”

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## Choosing success in how we understand and support first-generation students can yield truly transformative outcomes. It restructures our perspectives such that success is no longer the exception to the supposed rule, but rather the *expectation*.

“Unprepared” became “clean slate.” “Lost” became “opportunity.” “Stubborn” became “perseverance.”

Choosing success for first-generation students is ultimately a moral imperative, because the unfortunate truth is that low expectations have the potential to change lives as much as high expectations do. While low expectations are fueled by negativity and doubt, high expectations are powered by positivity and enthusiasm. A retention strategy or approach based on the belief that first-generation students are “stubborn” is going to look vastly different from one that structurally acknowledges their “perseverance.”

The point of all of this is that we as higher education professionals have a choice; an alternative paradigm does exist for supporting first-generation students. It is one that dignifies them by focusing on their strengths and capacity for success rather than any deficiency we might mistakenly impose on them.

### SERVANT LEADERSHIP: A FIRST-GENERATION STUDENT FRAMEWORK

IN 1977, ROBERT K. GREENLEAF INTRODUCED the concept of servant leadership. The theory is instructive when it comes to first-generation students for two primary reasons. First, in explaining what comprised servant leadership, Greenleaf asked, “Do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become leaders” (p. 4)? As has been discussed, personal growth is what is at stake when we decide whether or not we will choose success for first-generation college students. Second, Greenleaf describes servant leadership as “a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in essence, a way of being—that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society” (p. 4). This statement not only reaffirms how rejecting deficit-oriented approaches can benefit first-generation students, but also acknowledges the complex nature of doing so.

From a philosophical standpoint, there are obvious parallels between the tenets of servant leadership and the perspective that has been offered here with respect to

first-generation students. However, the characteristics of the servant leader offered by Larry C. Spears in *Tracing the Past, Present and Future of Servant Leadership* provide a concrete description of how an individual might operate in practice. Spears identifies the following 10 major attributes of servant leadership: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. It is clear that a deficit-oriented approach to first-generation students makes it very difficult to incorporate virtually any of these attributes at the individual level, let alone at the broader programmatic or institutional levels. After all, how can we be committed to the growth of people if we have adopted a deficit-focused approach to engaging them?

On the other hand, choosing success in how we understand and support first-generation students can yield truly transformative outcomes. It restructures our perspectives such that success is no longer the exception to the supposed rule, but rather the *expectation*. We forge individual and collective mind-sets that extricate “resilience” from “denial” and “learning” from “assimilation.” Granted, weaving such a philosophy within ourselves and within the services we provide for first-generation students is not simple work. Despite that, we must recall perspectives such as that of Spears, who proclaims that a servant leader approach has “the potential for raising the quality of life throughout society” (p. 4).

At the close of my conference presentation, I asked those in the audience who were first-generation students to raise their hands. Nearly half of the room did, including advisers, teachers, program directors, institutional researchers, and academic deans. Incidentally, according to a 2010 US Department of Education report, that number is reflective of the percentage of first-generation students enrolled at higher education institutions across the United States. It should also serve as a vivid reminder of the potential for social change inherent in empowering first-generation students.

The perspectives offered here speak to one core principle that should drive the work of engaging all students, but especially first-generation students—belief. As higher education professionals we must

believe in the impact that our thought processes can have in terms of changing lives. We must each aspire to be like my college psychology professor and mentor who, among other acts of support, encouraged me to think about graduate school. It made a difference in my life that endures today.

The prize of these efforts is learning and personal growth for first-generation students. Specifically, these students learn to truly believe in themselves and their capacity not only to succeed, but also to flourish. As is already the case with many of their continuing-generation peers upon entering college, these students learn that success in college and life is for them and their families too. This idea speaks directly to intergenerational enhancement, and frames the possibilities for positively and exponentially transforming future student outcomes.

As higher education professionals, we must acknowledge our roles in earning that reality; we must choose success for first-generation college students.

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#### NOTES

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