CHAPTER NINE

Advising First-Generation and Socioeconomically Diverse Honors Students

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Honors programs and colleges increasingly consider socioeconomic status as a form of diversity by actively recruiting first-generation and low-income college students. Supporting this movement, the National Collegiate Honors Council's "Shared Principals and Practices of Honors Education" (2022) highlights the need for inclusive excellence from across all communities. First-generation and low-income students are often high-potential students, and their inclusion into honors communities enhances the whole. The challenge, though, is retaining and graduating these students at rates similar to their more advantaged peers. Academic advising can be an effective tool in these efforts.

First-generation college students, defined as students from households where neither parent has a baccalaureate degree (Davis, 2010), make up 58% of college enrollments nationwide (Redford & Hoyer, 2017). Students from a low-income background, as indicated

by eligibility for a Pell grant, represent 33% of the American higher education student population (Baum, 2015). Approximately 24% of college students are both first generation and low income (Engle & Tinto, 2008). There is certainly room for growth in honors programs and colleges for first-generation and low-income students (Smith & Zagurski, 2013). As Phillip L. Frana (2023) mentions in this monograph, honors advising has recently increased its work in supporting underrepresented populations in honors. This work in supportive justice would demand that honors programs and honors colleges increase enrollments of these diverse populations until honors demographics approximate or even exceed those at the institutional level.

FIRST-GENERATION AND LOW-INCOME COLLEGE STUDENTS

First-generation college students are more likely to be female, older, and married with dependents (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998) and also to work while in college (Pascarella et al., 2004). They are also more likely to attend two-year institutions (Bui, 2002; Engle, 2007). Like first-generation college students, low-income students are more likely to be female, older, ethnically diverse, first generation, married, or to have dependents such as children (Berkner et al., 2002).

Only 10% of first-generation college students who started at a two-year institution earned a bachelor's degree compared with 40% of those who started at a four-year institution (Bui, 2002). Similarly, low-income college students are more likely to delay beginning post-secondary education and to begin at two-year colleges (Berkner et al., 2002). Overall, only 47% of first-generation college students earned a degree compared with 78% of continuing-generation students (Engle, 2007). By age 24, only 12% of low-income college students had graduated from college compared to 73% of wealthier students (Mortenson, 2007).

The transition to college itself is more difficult for first-generation college students. Janet M. Billson and Margaret B. Terry (1982) noted that "they are making a longer jump from the social status of their parents than are second-generation students. *And* they are

making that jump with fewer resources and less support" (p. 18). Other researchers have explained: "Those who were the first in their immediate family to attend college were *breaking*, not continuing, family tradition" (Terenzini et al., 1994, p. 63) and describe college as "a 'leap of faith' for these students because no one in their families has done it before" (Engle et al., 2007, p. 5).

Nor is this a new phenomenon. Data from the 1988 National Education Longitudinal Study found that 47% of all students in higher education were first-generation college students, and that first-generation college students comprised 73% of students at less-than-two-year institutions, 53% of students at two-year institutions, and 34% of students at four-year institutions (Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007). Sixty-eight percent of first-generation college students planned to enroll in college immediately after high school, but only 24% actually enrolled and graduated from college within 8 years, compared with 91% of continuing-generation college students who planned to enroll and 68% who earned a degree within the same period of time (Engle, 2007).

Socioeconomically diverse college students were more likely to be female (Berkner et al., 2002; Chen, 2005; Ishitani, 2006), an ethnic minority (Berkner et al., 2002; Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006), from lower-income families (Berkner et al., 2002; Bui, 2002; Chen, 2005; Housel & Harvey, 2010), and to have spoken a language other than English at home (Bui, 2002). When they did enroll in college, socioeconomically diverse college students were more likely to enroll at two-year institutions (Berkner et al., 2002; Chen, 2005; Engle, 2007; Engle et al., 2007) than at four-year institutions, and they typically choose less academically selective institutions (Berkner et al., 2002; Pascarella et al., 2004).

Many researchers have recommended intensive advising programs specifically for socioeconomically diverse college students (DiMaria, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Thayer, 2000). Clifford Adelman's (2006) analysis found that college students as a whole were less likely to persist or to graduate if they earned fewer than 20 units in their first year or if they had several repeated or withdrawn courses on their record, and he recommended academic advising to help students to make appropriate course selections. Kathleen

Cushman (2007) recommended programs that connect students with faculty members outside of large and impersonal classes.

ACADEMIC ADVISING

Because academic advising is an emerging field of scholarly inquiry (Hagen et al., 2010), there is a paucity of research on advising specific student populations, including first-generation college students. Angela R. Sickles (2004) provided a list of suggestions for advisors of first-generation college students. Since not all students have had experience with TRIO programs, she stated that many first-generation college students will turn to their academic advisor for advice not just about academics or policies, but also for guidance on navigating day-to-day life in college. Advisors must have comprehensive knowledge of the campus and of campus resources and be prepared to help students to access these resources. While time consuming initially, she explained that "the relationship that the advisor has built with these students will allow the student to feel more at home on the campus and be better equipped to deal with the stresses of being the first in the family to obtain a degree in higher education" (Sickles, 2004, para. 11).

Similarly, Ruth A. Darling and Melissa S. Smith (2007) wrote on the challenges associated with being a first-generation college student, especially during the first year. They suggested that academic advisors team up with others who have a shared interest in first-generation college students to assess institutional data, campus culture, and the needs of first-generation college students on their campus. Advisors are able to advocate for these students more easily by recommending specific programs and policies for supporting these students on campus. Darling and Smith (2007) also recommended comprehensive advising, especially in building a thoughtful first-year schedule that addresses the strengths and weaknesses of the individual student. They also suggested connecting early and often with first-generation college students during the first year, particularly through first-year seminars. This strategy could be equally beneficial for low-income students who need support when facing the challenges associated with financial struggles in college.

Academic advisors can serve as models for socioeconomically diverse college students in understanding higher education's bureaucracies and expectations (Cushman, 2007; Darling & Smith, 2007; Sickles, 2004). Academic advisors may be able to impart some of the information and cultural capital that socioeconomically diverse students lack (Cushman, 2007) by helping them to understand higher education and their role as a college student. Academic advisors have the institutional knowledge that socioeconomically diverse students lack and that more advantaged peers may have learned at home from their parents.

There has been extensive research on first-generation college students during the last several decades that has shown that these students face different challenges than students from more educated families. They do not enroll, persist, or graduate from college at the same rate as students whose parents went to college. Most of this research was quantitative in nature or focused on describing the experiences of first-generation college students. Through qualitative interviews with academic advisors who were both first-generation college students themselves and who advise first-generation college students, this study seeks to understand how academic advising, which is a strategy multiple researchers have endorsed, could help first-generation and socioeconomically diverse honors students succeed in college.

BEST PRACTICES

The researcher interviewed 10 academic advisors who identified as first-generation college students and who currently advise at least some first-generation college students.* All participants were currently academic advisors at public universities in the state of North Carolina. While none of the advisors were honors-only advisors, many had caseloads that included honors students as well as students from first-generation and/or low-income backgrounds. See Table 1 for institutional and demographics data on interviewees.

*This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Appalachian State University and was conducted under the auspices of the Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership.

All 10 participants had unique stories of their experiences as first-generation and, often, socioeconomically diverse college students and now as academic advisors, but many elements were strikingly similar and led to common themes emerging from the transcripts and documents about the characteristics of first-generation college students and the role of an advisor.

Although first-generation and socioeconomically diverse college students share many characteristics, advisors should not assume that all such students are the same. Advisors should consider and use different strategies to effectively advise and assist

Table 1. Institutional and Demographic Data on Interviewees

Name	Institutional Details	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Experience
John	Medium-sized, inclusive historically Black master's university, urban	Male	African American	4
J. Edward	Medium-sized, inclusive historically Black master's university, urban	Female	African American	5
Shirley	Large, more selective master's university, urban	Female	Caucasian	10
Isabella	Large, more selective master's university, urban	Female	Caucasian	11
Chastity	Large, more selective master's university, urban	Female	Caucasian	6
Sarah	Large, more selective master's, town	Female	Caucasian, Native American	14
Frank	Large, more selective master's, town	Male	Caucasian	5
Don Juan	Large, more selective master's, town	Male	African American	2
Sam	Medium-sized, inclusive historically Black master's university, urban	Male	Caucasian	5
Rose	Medium-sized, selective master's university, rural	Female	African American, Native American	6

individual students, who just happen to be first generation, socioeconomically diverse, or both.

Participants strongly advised other advisors to capitalize on the enthusiasm and pride of socioeconomically diverse students in college by pointing out their accomplishments and focusing on the positives rather than the challenges associated with being first-generation and/or socioeconomically diverse college students. For example, socioeconomically diverse students were often more resilient and more appreciative of the opportunities afforded by higher education. Half of the participants explicitly mentioned pride in their accomplishments, either internally or externally from family and friends. Several advisors also noted that they sometimes find it easier to work with socioeconomically diverse students because these students are more likely than their more advantaged peers to listen to the advisor.

Sarah, who advises pre-health students, including many honors students, said that being a first-generation college student "[c]reates a sense of resiliency. You have to really go out and figure things out on your own, which . . . is an asset because then you aren't having to depend on someone else to tell you what you need to be doing. You go out and figure it out for yourself." She also said that she was more appreciative of the opportunities she had as a first-generation college student. She said: "just having the appreciation of the opportunity that you are being given is a benefit as well, knowing that you are getting an opportunity that other students might take for granted." She appreciates this skill and tenacity in her first-generation college students now because she learned them herself.

Even so, socioeconomically diverse students need to feel invested in the process of college and to understand both the why and the how. They also need to feel like they have a sense of ownership over and independence in their college careers. Don Juan shared that he shows students progress reports from instructors, unless the faculty member requests anonymity, in order to let the students see that his advice is not based on only one opinion, but rather that it is coming directly from faculty members. He also noted that it is important to explain why students need to take

certain courses or to complete certain tasks rather than just telling them to do it.

Similarly, Sam said that he not only tries to cover the broad processes of college, but also the details that students might not understand or might be afraid to ask, like the date when financial aid checks are disbursed or information on applying for financial aid. Because of his own experience of being confused as a student, this advisor is aware that some students may be too embarrassed to ask questions, so he answers them even if they are not asked. Students can ignore the information if they do not need it, but for many, those details can be important in helping them to understand various activities and procedures. For socioeconomically diverse honors students, knowledge of financial aid policies can be key in helping them to qualify for and effectively use their financial aid. That students have earned scholarships does not mean that they know how to access them or retain them.

In addition to all of the other challenges that most college students face in transitioning to college, such as time management and learning new study skills, all of the participants reported that socioeconomically diverse students face unique challenges. One of the major challenges discussed by the participants was that such students, as Frank said, "don't know what they don't know" about college. In some cases, students expected college to be a continuation of high school. Others did not pursue higher education until later in life, which made the transition harder because other life experiences, such as a career in the military or raising a family, left a significant gap between their educational experiences.

Many students who have not experienced college through stories from their parents may cobble together knowledge of college life from friends and media. As Rose said, "It was just a lot of things that TV didn't prepare me for, because what you see on TV is nothing like what you go in and do." Unfortunately, Rose learned that few Hollywood or television representations of college are accurate. Many socioeconomically diverse students glean their knowledge about college from inaccurate media sources because they do not have parents or family members who can explain the realities of

college life. Representations of honors education in film and television are even less likely to be accurate or useful.

Most of the participants also noted that students were not prepared for the financial realities of college, like fees, meal plans, and other expenses they had not anticipated. Many socioeconomically diverse students must also work while in college, which can negatively impact their grades and increase their time to graduation. Several participants reported that working while in college contributed to their mediocre grades during their final semester at their first institution and that those lackluster grades ultimately led to them making the decision to leave that institution. Advisors who understand the financial realities of college can encourage students to pursue jobs, such as on-campus jobs with flexible hours, that will not impact their studies.

Many socioeconomically diverse students, particularly those who are attending their local colleges or commuter schools, choose to live with parents or other family members to reduce costs. For those students, advisors can encourage participating in on-campus activities and engaging with the campus and scholarly community. For students who are members of honors programs or colleges that offer honors residential opportunities, being actively involved can be particularly challenging for non-residential students if they do not make a determined effort. Participation in honors activities for those who are not living in honors residence halls can help to cement a connection with their honors program or college.

One major motif from the interviews was the need for advisors to establish a personal relationship with students early in their academic careers. All ten of the participants strongly emphasized the need for a personal relationship between the advisor and student. Isabella said that advisors "can make a huge difference" when they "make themselves appear more human" and do not "stay on the academic pedestal."

Relationship types and styles varied in this group of advisors. Isabella adopted a maternal tone with most students because she is a mother and grandmother. Other advisors became friendly with their first-generation college students. Rose and Shirley said that

they encouraged students to be casual and forthcoming with them. Rose, who advised student-athletes, gave them her personal cell phone number so that they could call or text her when they had a problem because she wanted them to think of her as their contact person at the university. Shirley decorated her office with Grateful Dead posters and other items that reflect her personality since she found that they often triggered conversations with students about their own musical preference. She used those conversations to establish rapport; she explained: "My students come up and fist bump me all the time, you know? We're down!" The upside of such a relationship is that students are comfortable with their advisor and unafraid to come to them with problems. The downside is potentially learning too much about students. As Rose wryly noted: "I've learned things about my students that, if I'd never known, I'd be okay." The other participants encouraged a relationship that was more strictly academic rather than friendly; J. Edward said she sometimes had to remind students she was their advisor, not their friend. Rose also said that establishing a cycle of trust with students is important because current students will tell new students that she really is there to help and can be trusted. Whatever the preferred dynamic, the key point is to form a relationship early in the academic cycle.

First-generation and socioeconomically diverse college students are a large and integral part of college demographics, and they are a group that honors programs and colleges should seek to recruit, retain, and graduate. While these students may face more challenges than some of their more advantaged peers, research shows that they are capable of excelling in college (Pascarella et al., 2004) and, thus, in honors education. With support, especially via honors advising, first-generation and socioeconomically diverse college students can be successful participants and graduates of these programs, which will, in turn, help to end disadvantageous cycles for these students and their families. For honors programs and colleges, growing the number of first-generation and socioeconomically diverse colleges students will increase diversity as well as contribute positively toward institutional goals of expanding diversity and social justice.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

1. Please tell me about yourself.
    a. Personal and family history
    b. Academic history
2. What was it like for you as a first-generation college student when you were in college?
    a. Benefits
    b. Challenges
    c. Support systems
3. What is it like for you now as an academic advisor of first-generation college students?
    a. Personal connection/empathy
    b. Providing support/resources
4. Because you have experienced being part of this population from both sides (student and advisor), what do you think are the best practices for advising first-generation college students?
    a. Benefits/challenges of being a first-generation college student?
    b. How can academic advisors support first-generation college students?
    c. What other resources on campus do you use or recommend?
    d. What documents (electronic or print) do you use with first-generation college students?