

# MOTIVATING FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS TO ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND COLLEGE COMPLETION

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Institutions play an important role in motivating students by understanding intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate students to remain in college. Postsecondary institutions should provide a range of programs to help these students face their challenges and weaknesses. Colleges and universities should escalate the process of creating bridge programs that link higher education to secondary education. These experiences provide academic and social pathways that assist first-generation students overcome inadequate preparation for college. It is recommended using creative approaches to motivate students, such as field trips, presentations by other first-generation college students, and collaborative planning for transition could benefit this population of students.

Keywords: First Generation Students, Motivation, Academic Success

First-generation students are an “increasingly significant force” entering into postsecondary education institutions (Mitchell, 1997, p. 13). During the past decade, Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that over 4.5 million first-generation students were enrolled in postsecondary institutions in the United States. Researchers developed synonymous definitions for first-generation students. Hsiao (1992) and Mitchell defined first-generation students as the first in their families to attend college. Yet, the most cited and widely used definition for first-generation students is someone whose parents have not completed a college degree (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin, 1998; Hicks, 2003; McConnell, 2000; Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; U.S. Department of Education, 2009; Willett, 1989). Independent of the definition, being a first-generation student has ultimate challenges and major disadvantages toward achieving academic success and college completion

(Lee, Sax, Kim, & Hagedorn, 2004; Nuniez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998).

In a longitudinal study conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) from 1992 through 2000, 43% of first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary institutions left college without obtaining a degree in the United States (Chen, 2005). In fact, first-generation students faced a myriad of challenges in pursuit of earning college degrees (Hsiao, 1992). Throughout the literature review, it became apparent that the major challenge resided in motivating these students to devote sufficient study time to achieve academic success and college completion. Motivation (Wikipedia, 2010) is defined as the activation or on-set of goal-oriented behavior, and can be attributed to intrinsic factors or extrinsic factors. Hodges-Payne (2006) asserted that a thorough understanding of the factors that motivate first-generation college students is critical.

Motivation is complicated, especially when dealing with students that face many challenges (Wise, 2003).

The purpose of this literature review is to explore barriers faced by first-generation students that may potentially impact students' academic success and college completion. The literature review is also designed to provide an overview of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and McClelland's Need for Achievement theories. In addition, the review presents a theoretical approach of how these motivation theories can be used to motivate first-generation students intrinsically and extrinsically.

#### **First-Generation Student Barriers**

Engle and Tinto (2008) reported that first-generation students were nearly four times more likely to leave higher education institutions without a degree when compared to their counterparts. Research has indicated that first-generation students are more likely to be older, married, have children, employed, attend college less than full time, and be less involved in college activities (Hodges-Payne, 2006; Nuniez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). First-generation students face more challenges to graduate from college than students of parents who are college graduates (DiMaria, 2006; McConnell, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1993). Moreover, one major obstacle that first-generation students encounter is the ability to function and thrive in two opposite worlds (Mitchell, 1997). Hsiao (1992) identified these two worlds as: (a) the culture of home and (b) the culture of higher education. Many first-generation students are forced to have multiple roles while attempting to attend college. As research has shown, many first-generation students' obstacles begin before they leave their homes. Parents and/or close relatives are not equipped to provide information required for college (Thayer, 2000; Willett, 1989).

Many first-generation students also bear

the unfortunate title of *low-income* (Engle & Tinto, 2008), due to the fact that their parents are not college graduates and their earning potential is minimal. Low-income families struggle to understand the benefits of graduating from college (Hodges-Payne, 2006; Mitchell, 2007) for themselves and their children. Students from low-income families may have to divide their time between attending college and working. Although many students work during their college years, first-generation students work because of their obligations to support other responsibilities they may have outside of college. Consequently, first-generation students spend more time working and less time studying, unlike their classmates (Mitchell, 1997; Terenzini et al., 1995). In a study conducted by Prospero and Vohra-Gupta (2007), their findings supported prior research that documented that first-generation students work more hours when compared with their non-first generation peers and are more likely to drop out of college by the second year. With the lack of support at home, first-generation students deal with countless challenges in their attempt to conquer a higher education (Hsiao, 1992).

Hicks (2003) conveyed that first-generation college students may be psychologically less prepared for college. The challenges that first-generation students face are critical to their academic success. A study conducted by Hicks (2006), that compared educational barriers of first-generation to non-first-generation students, concluded that first-generation students had dissimilar expectations of college, poorer academic abilities, lack of social preparation, lack of self-esteem, and more financial constraints (Hicks, 2003; Thayer, 2000). This study also provided a rationale as to why first-generation students do not perform well and tended to drop out prior to graduation.

Engle and Tinto (2008) noted that the *acknowledged* barriers decrease the chances

for first-generation, low-income students to persist in college through graduation. Disadvantaged students have a lack of academic motivation; therefore it becomes apparent why students lack interest in college (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000), which results in inferior academic performance and subsequent disenrollment from college. In order to be serious about student retention, institutions should recognize the origin of challenges students face (Tinto, 1999). Postsecondary institutions must then develop successful mechanisms for motivating first-generation students to persist in pursuing college degrees.

#### Overview of Motivation Theories

In order to motivate people, their attitudes and behaviors must be contemplated, according to Wendover (1995). An overview of Maslow and McClelland's theoretical approaches can provide an understanding of factors related to motivation.

#### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow implemented The Hierarchy of Needs in 1954, and is frequently cited when discussing human motivation. The hierarchy is designed as a pyramid, and includes five levels. Maslow asserted that the lower level needs must be met before progressing to higher level needs on the hierarchy. The levels are as follows:

1. *Physiological Needs* are considered as the basic needs of individuals that include air, food, water, sex, and shelter.
2. *Safety Needs* are having the feeling of being safe and protected against danger and harm.
3. *Social Needs* are inclusive of having a sense of belonging and being loved. Maslow (1954) used the example of a tree needing food and sunlight as symbolic to a person needing safety, love, respect, and the need to belong in order to be motivated.

4. *Esteem Needs* are inclusive of attention, confidence, freedom, independence, recognition, and self-respect. McClelland (2001) indicated that the need for achievement (n Ach) is also included in esteem needs.
5. *Self-actualization Needs* are defined as "experiencing fully, vividly, selflessly, with full concentration and total absorption" (Maslow, 1965, p. 111). Self-actualization is a process of one coming to terms with their fullest potential (Maslow).

Maslow (2001) described the desire for self fulfillment and becoming actualized in what they are potentially and everything that they are capable of becoming is self-actualization. The highest level of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as it relates to first-generation students is self-actualization, which provides a direct link to McClelland's theory of n Ach.

#### McClelland's Need for Achievement (n Ach)

McClelland's (2001) theory focuses on individuals with an increased level of n Ach, which leads to an increased level of self-esteem. Individuals with a high level of n Ach are always seeking ways to achieve new successes regardless of their surroundings. The theory identifies that if a need is powerful enough within an individual, it can positively affect the intrinsic motivation of the individual to demonstrate behavior which leads to satisfaction to accomplish the need. McClelland also categorized humans into two categories: (1) those individuals faced with many adversities and challenges, but have developed a mindset to overcome those challenges to achieve success and (2) those who have no concerns or worries, nor a need to overcome challenges.

In the study conducted by Hodges-Payne (2006), one of the strongest motivators for

first-generation students was the influence of themselves and their need for achievement. Validating a student's need for achievement can lead to a self-affirmation process as students reach higher levels of achievement (Terenzini et al., 1993). Leaders are responsible for developing concepts to assist and instruct individuals with increasing and maintaining their n Ach, by providing an encouraging environment in which individuals can excel (McClelland, 2001). Likewise, Beach and Lindahl (2004) shared the importance of leaders being knowledgeable of the motivational theories, as they advance in the institutional improvement processes.

#### **Motivating First-Generation Students**

Motivation starts with having an understanding of the individual, and taking into consideration such factors as their environment (Wendover, 1995), which may be a motivational factor. Unfortunately, there is no magical remedy for motivating students. Humans are complex individuals, and when educators began identifying ways to motivate individuals they are treading on thin ice. Martin (2009) noted that not all students are motivated by the same desires and needs. There are some students who are motivated by having the support of others, and some by overcoming obstacles that appear to hold them back from achieving the accomplishments at hand (Martin). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and McClelland's n Ach models are based on human needs. The needs are based on internal states of mind that cause individuals to have certain attitudes and behaviors to satisfy their needs. Specifically, social needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization are linked to the barriers of first-generation students.

#### **Social Needs**

Many students have needs to be *social and belong*. These needs tend to be unfulfilled when families of first-generation students are unsupportive or possibly stand in the way of their achievement, which also leads to a lack of self esteem. In addition, students begin to feel uncomfortable at institutions because they do not socially fit in (Hsiao, 1992). First-generation students are at risk for leaving college, and more importantly their social and academic integration play a role in their departure from college, or to students remaining in college (McCay & Estrella, 2008). The social component and the need to belong are critical to motivating and retaining these students in college in order for them to succeed. Although the sole purpose of college is to become academically prepared for the workforce, the social component is just as important, because if students feel socially isolated, they will not enjoy their college experience (Martin, 2009). Hodges-Payne (2006) documented that motivation will increase when students are socially integrated into college with a sense of belonging.

#### **Esteem Needs**

Hicks (2006) pointed out that first-generation college students have lower self-esteem, which prevents them from excelling in their academics. Maslow stated "satisfaction of the self esteem needs leads to feelings of self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy of being useful and necessary in the world" (2001, p. 62). The n Ach theory also involves increasing an individual's self-esteem. McClelland asserted that as obstacles are overcome it tends to provoke motivation (McClelland, 2001), which in turn increases self-esteem. Perez (1998) and Rendon (1995) proposed that colleges must assist students in overcoming low self-esteem

and fear of failure. In fact, Hunter (2006) discussed that developing activities that allowed student involvement not only increases the student's feelings of inclusiveness and a sense of belonging, these activities also motivated and increased their self-esteem.

### Self-Actualization Needs

Maslow described self-actualization as not only an end state but the process of actualizing one's potentialities at any time and any amount (Maslow, 1965, p. 113). As individuals develop a high n Ach, they tend to find effective ways to continue to increase motivation to accomplish their goals (McClelland, 2001). Acquiring a high level of achievement and a maximum level of self-development is inclusive of having self-achievement. Terenzini et al. (1993) explained the importance of first-generation students having self-actualization in academics, socially, and culturally as they transition to college. Sordlet-Leonard (2002) indicated in her study that TRIO programs funded by the U.S. Department of Education not only assisted students with academics and finances, but also reach beyond the classroom to assist students to increase their n Ach and self-actualization. As a result of TRIO programs initiatives, first-generation students persist and graduation rates have increased.

Researchers suggested that with a high level of n Ach, obtaining goals can promote intrinsic motivation (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Self-actualization contributes to intrinsic development or intrinsic motivation of what is already internal (Maslow, 1954). Equally important self-actualization plays a vital role in the lives of disadvantaged students, because it is critical in students' academic, social, and cultural development (Terenzini et al., 1993).

**Intrinsic motivation.** Motivation does not always lead to creating a cash incentive; however, it does lead to providing a path that

allows individuals to distinctively express themselves and feel a sense of accomplishment and value (Wendover, 1995). At the same time, intrinsic motivation is defined as being laboriously progressing toward a goal for an individual's sake. Having intrinsic motivation makes it easier for first-generation students, especially in their academic integration into the college system (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007); however, the concept of intrinsic goals is not clear-cut, yet students who connect their college work to their intrinsic interests consistently appreciate college more (Tagg, 2003).

Daniels and Araposatathis (2005) asserted that not all college students have the same level of intrinsic motivation or the abilities to handle the obstacles they encounter; however, there appears to be an obvious link between intrinsic motivation and higher academic achievement. First-generation students who attend colleges and universities that promote systematic changes will likely develop an intrinsic motivation for achieving college degrees which may result in academic success and higher graduation rates (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). Intrinsic rewards are purposely designed to provide higher levels of goal achievement for first-generation students. Some of these students, however, have challenging situations to overcome which, if successful, may lead to external rewards (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000) to specifically include higher salaries as first-generation students graduate from college. Intrinsic motivation has a long term effect as it relates to conditions that institutions want to develop to aid students to accomplish higher goals (Tagg, 2003)

**Extrinsic motivation.** Extrinsic motivation comes with limitations (Tagg, 2003). Wendover (1995) indicated that individuals cannot motivate people, but can provide the stimulus for people to motivate themselves. Acknowledging Maslow's Hierarchical

Model, humans must have their basic needs met, in order for motivation to increase. Although intrinsic motivation is linked to one's free will, extrinsic motivation depends on the attitude, behavior, and the perception of the individual (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Extrinsic motivation typically is an external factor that develops and extends beyond the activity itself (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). External rewards are important for unmotivated students who lack interest in college. Increasing students' motivational levels to become academically prepared by understanding the importance of college degrees may be a significant factor that often motivates students who may otherwise not have the opportunity for a higher earning potential (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta; Sidle & McReynolds, 2009). However, Hidi and Harackiewicz revealed that extrinsic rewards may increase higher motivation for the academically unmotivated first-generation students who come from a low-income background.

### Conclusion

Hunter (2006) stated that "moving beyond isolated initiatives is no longer an option; it is a necessity" (p.6) for postsecondary institutions. The effort to help first-generation students succeed does not end once they are admitted to college; this process is just the beginning (Hsiao, 1992). Institutions play an important role in motivating students by understanding intrinsic and extrinsic factors that motivate students to remain in college. Postsecondary institutions should provide a range of programs to help these students face their challenges and weaknesses. For example, colleges and universities should escalate the process of creating bridge programs that link higher education to secondary education. These experiences provide academic and social pathways that assist first-generation students overcome inadequate preparation for

college (Hsiao). Hicks (2003) recommended using creative approaches to motivate students, such as field trips, presentations by other first-generation college students, and collaborative planning for transition could benefit this population of students.

As researchers have repeatedly demonstrated, first-generation students lack motivation and lack directions at home and within the postsecondary educational systems (Hsiao, 1992; Mitchell, 1997). Overcoming intimidation and obstacles are skills that first-generation students lack but must learn in order to survive in college. Maslow's Hierarchical Model and McClelland's n Ach theoretical approaches are two models that provide tested approaches toward understanding human needs as they relate to motivation. Use of these models through effective research methods may provide vital pathways for first generation-students' admission, persistence, and graduation from colleges and universities.

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