

Article 54

First Generation College-Bound Students: A Small Group Intervention

Amanda Hatfield and Lia D. Falco

Hatfield, Amanda, M.Ed., is a recent graduate of the School Counseling program in the department of Educational Psychology at the University of Arizona.

Falco, Lia D., Ph.D., is an adjunct assistant professor in the Disability and Psychoeducational Studies department at the University of Arizona.

First generation college students are a growing population in universities and two-year colleges and tend to be ethnic minorities, females, lower income, and older than traditional college students (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007; Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004). First generation college-bound students are typically an underserved group in most schools around the nation, which is evident in their lower college completion rates (Slaughter, 2009). Many of these students face challenges such as financial hardship, lack of preparedness for college level work, lack of guidance in the college application process, and negative stereotypes (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Because they are a diverse group with a unique set of challenges, first generation college-bound students may need additional support when preparing for their post secondary education. As noted by Gibbons and Shoffner (2004), small group counseling can be an effective way to help first generation college-bound students.

One purpose of guidance groups is to empower “at risk” populations (Smead, 1990), and the school counselor may play a pivotal role in the facilitation of such a group (different from that of a teacher or other adult). First generation college-bound students tend to have lower self-efficacy, negative outcome expectations, and perceived and real barriers to post-secondary preparation (Gibbons & Shoffner, 2004). Addressing these issues may be particularly well-suited for a group counseling intervention because it can allow for the students to gain information regarding specific issues while interacting with peers facing similar challenges.

This article describes a semi-structured psychoeducational group for first generation college-bound students. The purpose of the group was to aid the development of first generation college-bound, 11th grade students in their college preparation and readiness to transition out of high school. The group structure and session content are described, and the themes and issues that emerged as a result of the group process are discussed. Additionally, in order to evaluate the group outcomes related to participants’ readiness to transition out of high school, pre-and post-test data were collected using the Transitions Measure adapted from Smead (1990). The results are presented, and the implications for practice are discussed.

Planning and Preparation

The target population for the small group counseling intervention was former Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) students who were in 11th grade at a large high school in southeastern Arizona. AVID targets low income, minority, middle grade point average, first generation college-bound students. The program was implemented for two years (2006 – 2008 school years) and ended at the beginning of the 2008 – 2009 school year due to lack of funding. The 11th grade students were receiving assistance during their ninth and tenth grade years to help them prepare for college but were left without guidance at the beginning of their 11th grade year. The population was identified based on their need for continued support for their college preparation.

Group Member Selection Process

Each student who was part of the AVID program was interviewed individually to determine their interest in the intervention. If a student indicated an interest and felt the goals identified by the facilitator would be helpful, he or she was provided a parental consent form. After the initial interviews, small group interviews were conducted with students who returned the parental consent form. Students were then selected based on their interest in the group and their willingness to attend sessions during their lunch hour. As recommended by Smead (1990), counseling must be voluntary in order to improve one's personal development.

The group consisted of six 11th grade students (three females and three males). The composition of this group of students is appropriate for a high school group counseling intervention (Carrell, 2000). All students previously participated in the AVID program, were Mexican-American, were receiving free or reduced lunch, were within a 2.5 – 3.5 cumulative grade point average range, and were first generation college-bound. The group was co-facilitated by two females, one school counseling student intern, and the school's 11th grade counselor. The closed group consisted of ten bi-weekly sessions that took place during the second semester of the school year.

Group Session Format

Session 1

The first session was dedicated to completing the pre-tests and initial group activities. An ice breaker was conducted to allow the students to express their fears about college entrance. Some of the students wrote about fears of not getting into college, not being able to pay for college, and not having support from their parents. Then, a round-table discussion began about the group's purpose, rules, expectations, and activities that the students wanted to explore throughout the remainder of the sessions. The students expressed a strong desire to discuss college entrance requirements and financial aid opportunities. They agreed to respect each other and keep everything confidential that occurred during the group meetings. To end the day the students each expressed their feelings about the group with one word, such as anxious, excited, nervous, etc. Many of the students said they were excited and anxious. They were very excited to learn many new things about the college preparation process, yet were anxious about what exactly

the group was going to entail. The students were reminded of topics for group sessions and were encouraged to bring ideas for meetings.

Session 2

The second session was dedicated to reviewing the students' transcripts and completing a personal data form. The students appeared to be eager to learn new things, but also seemed nervous. The personal data form is intended to summarize a student's accomplishments and activities throughout his/her high school career. The students were also informed of minimum requirements for entrance in a two-year college, as well as a four-year university. Many of the students noticed the discrepancy between their grades and qualifications and the entrance requirements for a four-year university. The group spent a significant amount of time discussing their post-secondary education options. Many of the students were surprised to find out the differences for the requirements between two-year colleges and four-year universities. The students began thinking about the option of going to a two-year college and then transitioning into a university.

Session 3

During the third session, the school counselor presented the group with information regarding scholarships and financial aid opportunities. It was during this session when the most discussion and questions occurred. The students were very eager to learn about the financial obstacles as well as the opportunities available to them. The topic of finances continued throughout the remainder of the sessions. Again, the students were able to explore their options in terms of community college versus a university because of the significant difference in the cost of tuition.

Session 4

The academic outreach coordinator for a four-year university in the area attended the fourth session as a guest. He presented the group with information regarding the in-state universities admittance requirements, financial issues, majors, and housing options. The students had the opportunity to ask many questions about the university and their options. Most of the questions concerned selecting a major that would help them get into a career of their choice.

Session 5

During the fifth session, the students explored their family history and worked on setting goals. The students created a family tree which consisted of the education and careers of their family members. The group discussed how this affects their education and career choices. One girl, in particular, noticed that all of the females in her family have been stay-at-home moms, except for her mother who is a secretary. No one in her family has more than a high school education, including her extended family. She realized this is probably one of the main reasons she wants to go to college and have a successful career. The students also worked on setting goals for their senior year in terms of their college application process. None of the students had taken the SAT or ACT, so that was a high priority for all of them.

Session 6

To follow-up with the fourth session with the academic outreach coordinator, the sixth session was dedicated to reviewing college majors the students were interested in pursuing. Each student selected a major then reviewed the requirements for that particular major and what careers they can pursue with the given major. Many of the students noticed an emphasis in a certain subject such as science in the major they are interested in, but they do not like that subject. The group talked about how the majors they were considering originally may not be what they truly want to pursue once in college. The group also discussed how a major does not have to be in the exact field of the career they are interested in pursuing.

Session 7

The seventh session was devoted to providing role models for the students. Three first generation college students who graduated from the same high school spoke with the high school students about their experiences with their post-secondary education. One of the first generation college students is attending a community college and is having it paid for by his employer. Another one is attending an in-state university and is receiving scholarships as well as financial aid. The third is attending an out-of-state private university and is paying for it with scholarships, financial aid, pay from her job, and loans. Each first generation college student addressed his or her unique situation and answered questions from the high school group members. Many of the high school students wanted to know about living arrangements in college and which option is the best. All of the college student role models encouraged the high school students to live on campus if possible. The high school students also wanted to know what it is like to live away from home and not be able to see their family every day. The college students addressed the issues of homesickness and how they each dealt with it in their own way. Many of the suggestions from the first generation college student role models were to schedule phone calls with their parents, as well as visits home especially during the first semester. The high school students related well to the first generation college students and exchanged email addresses with them to keep in contact if any more questions or concerns arose.

Session 8

During the eighth session, the students completed a time analysis worksheet. They were able to see how they each spend their time, and then the group discussed how that might change when they go to college. The students assume they will be spending less time in the classroom, but will need to devote more time to studying. They discussed how they plan on spending their free time and many of them stated that they hope they can learn how to manage their time more efficiently. The students happily talked about the freedom that comes with going to college, but some students also expressed their concern in regards to the freedom. One female student spoke about how she is afraid she will not have the discipline to go to class everyday if the professor is not taking attendance. Another female talked about her inability to focus if others are having fun around her. The counselors encouraged the students to brainstorm ways to help with these issues. Some of the students suggested creating a schedule with studying planned in, but for them to actually go to a quiet place rather than trying to study with friends around. They

also suggested having a “buddy” in each class that helps to hold them accountable for going to class each and every day. Throughout the session the students continually referred back to the discussion from the previous session with the college students and tried to envision college life as it was portrayed by the role models.

Session 9

The ninth session was dedicated to reviewing the students’ senior year of high school. Each group member was provided a timeline of important events and deadlines that will occur during the upcoming senior year. The students asked many questions about deadlines for scholarships, financial aid, and the college application process. The anxiety level of the students seemed heightened during this session because many of them still do not feel prepared for their senior year. The counselor asked the students how they were going to deal with this heightened anxiety. One student said she is going to take the SAT during the summer even though it is only offered at a location which is an hour away from her home. A male said he is going to start working on researching scholarships during the summer because his biggest concern is still the financial aspect of college. Many of the students said they were not going to do much during the summer, but they are going to begin the process right at the beginning of their senior year.

Session 10

The final session was used as a time to reflect on group members’ experiences in the group and to celebrate the group. The students had an opportunity to share one thing they took from the group, and the most common responses were a greater awareness of their shared experiences and an increased knowledge of the information regarding financial issues. The students also gave feedback on how to change the group and their main suggestions were to make it longer and include more students. They felt the group was very useful in terms of the growth as a college bound student and felt that it would be just as effective if more students were included. They suggested having 10 – 15 students in the group, to keep it small, but at the same time have more input from peer students. The students also suggested having the group during the first semester so the students can start planning more seriously for their post-secondary options during the second semester of their junior year. Most of the students expressed increased anxiety because, before the group they did not realize how many steps are involved in the college application process and all of the decisions necessary for selecting a college to attend.

Group Evaluation

To evaluate the effectiveness of the group on members' preparedness to transition out of high school, pre- and post-test data were collected using the Transitions Measurement (adapted from Smead, 1990). Items included statements such as: “I am concerned about my transition from high school,” and “I need more information about which education is relevant for my future career” (Smead, 1990), and students rated their responses using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree), to 7 (Strongly agree), with 4 (Uncertain) in the middle. The Transitions Measurement was chosen because the content of the items closely related to the purpose of the group such as readiness to transition out of high school, family influences, financial issues, selecting a

major, choosing a career, and self-beliefs. The pretest was given in February 2009 and the posttest in April 2009.

Results and Discussion

A paired samples t-test was used to check for any changes in student scores on the Transitions Measure from pre-test to post-test. The results indicated a significant change on this measure ($t = 33.377$, $df = 4.61$, $p < .001$). The mean increased from 43.83 to 45.33. These results indicate that the students reported feeling more confident in their choices and their ability to transition out of high school at the time of post-test.

Based on their responses to the items, the students seemed to be exploring their post-secondary options more in-depth and discussing their post-secondary options more often with the people who are important in their lives. It appears that the students gained valuable resources and knowledge for their college preparation after participating in this group. The students expressed their sincere gratitude for the information received, especially the information regarding resources such as financial assistance and access to knowledgeable people who can help them when they are preparing for their post-secondary education.

Throughout the intervention the most common themes that emerged for students were financial issues and the logistics of applying to and selecting a college. Many sessions focused on the requirements for specific colleges/universities as well as various degrees. In order to address their concerns with financial issues the students were provided with information about Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), scholarships, as well as the costs of community colleges versus four-year institutions. The students continually questioned the difference between and implications of attending a community college versus a four-year institution. Students were concerned about beginning their academic career at a community college, so they each explored their options and emotions regarding attending a community college as a stepping stone for their academic career. It was important to focus a large portion of the group time on their present concerns. Although activities were prepared for each session, it was more important to address their needs and help them work through their fears as they became more salient.

The size and duration of the group was ideal for this kind of small group counseling intervention (DeLucia-Waack, 2006). The group dynamics would not likely have been the same if it were targeted towards a larger group, nor is it always feasible to administer a group for a longer time period in a school setting. However, the size could be reasonably increased to a maximum of 10 members.

One of the limitations of the intervention was scheduling because it affected the attendance of some of the students. The intervention was during the lunch hour which sometimes conflicted with students' other extra curricular activities and commitments. Ideally, each student would have attended all ten sessions, but difficulties in scheduling small group interventions in schools are common (DeLucia-Waack, 2006).

In addition to using the Transitions Measurement to assess the effectiveness of the group, it may also be particularly valuable to include some behavioral assessments in the future. For example, it might be meaningful to follow up with the students in their senior year to determine if they have initiated the college going process. Various ways to

accomplish this would be to track how many of the group members take the ACT/SAT during the first semester of their senior year, how many apply for FAFSA and scholarships available to them, and how many submit college applications.

Overall, this group seemed to be very beneficial to the students and encouraged them to realize college is attainable for each and every one of them. The students began to understand the barriers they are facing, but it also helped them process and work towards overcoming barriers – both perceived and real. They now understand that there are financial assistance options available to help them pay for their post-secondary education. With the help of the college role models, the high school students were able to envision being successful at the college and university level.

Also, the small group allowed the students to express themselves in a safe environment. Due to the small size of the group the students seemed more willing to express their emotions and concerns. Classroom guidance lessons would also be beneficial to address the issues of the college going process, but first generation college-bound students arguably need more specific guidance and support than classroom guidance can provide. Furthermore, individual counseling with first generation college-bound students might not be as effective because it does not allow the students to get the support from their peers that a small group provides.

Small group counseling allowed for the students to establish a support system and gain valuable information specific to their unique needs. It is our belief that a small group counseling intervention, such as the one described here, has potential to address many of the unique challenges and barriers to success that many first generation college-bound students face – and that students who participate in such a group are more likely to gain increased skills and confidence to aid in their transition from high school to post-secondary educational settings.

References

- Capriccioso, R. (2006). *Aiding first-generation students*. Retrieved from <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2006/01/26/freshmen>
- Carrell, S. (2000). *Group exercises for adolescents: A manual for therapists* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DeLucia-Waack, J. L. (2006). *Leading psychoeducational groups for children and adolescents*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gibbons, M. M., & Shoffner, M. F. (2004). Prospective first-generation college students: Meeting their needs through social cognitive career theory. *Professional School Counseling*, 8(1), 91-97.
- Prospero, M., & Vohra-Gupta, S. (2007). First generation college students: Motivation, integration, and academic achievement. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 31, 963-975.
- Slaughter, J. (2009). It's time to get angry about underserved students. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 55(20), A68.

Smead, R. (1990). *Skills for living: Group counseling activities for young adolescents*. Champaign, IL: Research Press.

Tym, C., McMillion, R., Barone, S., & Webster, J. (2004). First-generation college students: A literature review. Retrieved from http://www.tgslc.org/pdf/first_generation.pdf

Note: This paper is part of the annual VISTAS project sponsored by the American Counseling Association. Find more information on the project at: http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/VISTAS_Home.htm