

## Article 11

### **A New Retention Variable: Hope and First Generation College Students**

Cyrus R. Williams and S. Kent Butler

Williams, Cyrus R., is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Florida in the Counselor Education Department. He has worked as a counselor with first generation college students at the University of Florida and the University of Connecticut. His research interest includes first generation college students and the intersection of race and socioeconomic status.

Butler, S. Kent, is an Associate Professor at the University of Central Florida. Dr. Butler is a Provisionally Licensed Professional Counselor (PLPC), Nationally Certified Counselor (NCC), and Nationally Certified School Counselor (NCSC), and his research and academic interests lie in the areas of Multicultural Counseling, Group Counseling, School Counseling, and Multicultural Supervision. He continues to work closely with colleagues, students, and clients surrounding issues of diversity and social justice in counseling.

Each year hundreds of thousands of students filled with excitement, enthusiasm, and hope begin their academic careers at colleges and universities across the country. Freshman entering into their initial college experience are often faced with a host of transition issues; to circumvent these issues, college administrators and practitioners are charged with providing these students with retention strategies to help them overcome the normal cognitive, social, and transitional problems related to the first year college experience (Barefoot, 2004). To that end, college administrators create and implement a variety of retention programs and activities designed to support student achievement (Swail, 2004). Especially important to consider when designing and assessing these programs are first generation college students. First generation college students are learners whose parents have either not attended college or completed a college degree (Billson & Terry, 1982); these students are also among the least likely to continue their studies and pursue post-secondary degrees (Thayer, 2000).

According to Clifton and Anderson (2002) traditionally based retention programs focus primarily on student's insufficiencies; they are misguided and often fail, because they only attempt to identify and treat student's remedial issues, defects, and academic shortcomings. Clifton and Anderson postulate that effective retention programs should concentrate on student strengths rather than focus on their deficits.

Hope is an example of a strengths based variable. This construct may assist college administrators and practitioners in their efforts to create retention strategies and activities specifically for this population. Hope has been correlated with academic success for college students (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 1999); this personality

characteristic differs from the commonly accepted definition of hope, which stipulates that most students enter college with the kind of hope filled with the perception that one can reach any desired goal (Lopez, Snyder, & Pedrotti, 2003). This interpretation of hope is based on emotion and is susceptible to fading or disappearing entirely when students face personal and academic challenges. On the other hand, there are other students who possess a different type of hope; this type of hope is based on the contemporary meaning which centers less on emotions, perception, and desires and more on thoughts (Shogren, Lopez, Wehmeyer, Little, & Pressgrove, 2006). Snyder, Feldman, Shorey, and Rand (2002) define Hope Theory conceptually as the “Process of thinking about one’s goals, along with the motivation to move toward those goals (agency), and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)” (p. 820). Studies conducted specifically on college students using Snyder’s Hope Scale show that high levels of hope correlates with higher semester and overall GPA (Chang, 1998; Snyder et al., 1991), however, there is a lack of research that supports the use of hope as a means to predict academic achievement for first generation college students.

### **Purpose**

This article provides (a) an overview of first generation college student’s participation in higher education; (b) outlines the unique issues that this student population possesses as a result of race and class; (c) delineates Snyder’s Hope Theory, which is utilized as the manuscripts working definition of hope, based on the theory’s positive correlation with academic success; (d) and provides suggestions and recommendations concerning activities and interventions that will assist in the development of a culture of hope on college campuses. An interrelated benefit of this work will be the establishment of a viable research agenda worthy of continued exploration as well as the naissance of a vehicle that instills hope and positive psychology into the lives of first generation college students.

### **Participation in Higher Education**

Access and completion rates for African American, Hispanic, and Native American students have always lagged behind those of White and Asian students (Gladieux & Swail, 1998). Research suggests that the same is true of first generation college students who are often disproportionately over-represented in groups which are habitually filled with the most disadvantaged (i.e., racially-based, socio-economically-based, and gender-based) students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Empirical studies conducted on first generation college students generally provide three themes of research related to: (1) academic preparation, (2) transition issues, and (3) campus climate, and frequently reflect the above stated disparity.

The primary theme of research concentrates on first generation college students and their academic preparation for college. Choy’s (2001) comprehensive study of first generation students, found that as a group, first generation students at 4-year institutions appear to begin college less academically prepared than other students. Choy further explains that in high school, potential first generation college students are less likely to follow a rigorous curriculum, take calculus, or take the SAT or ACT examinations. The

behaviors that Choy describes above are in direct conflict to what students need to do in order to gain admittance to college. Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) found that the college enrollment process requires students to complete four steps. Students must (a) decide that they want to pursue postsecondary education; (b) prepare academically for college level work; (c) take the SAT or ACT if they want to attend a 4-year institution, and (d) gain acceptance and make the financial and other necessary arrangements needed to enroll. Hossler et al. conclude that as a result of the intersection of race, class, and gender, first generation students fall short of accomplishing these steps and are more at risk of not gaining admittance, nor persisting towards graduation.

A second research theme that is evident in the literature focuses on the transitional problems that this population encounters when they arrive on campus. Folger, Carter, and Chase (2004) found that first generation students have transitional issues not generally met by the university, which often leaves them at a disadvantage. Their study also confirmed that when compared to White continuing-generation college students, first generation college students have a propensity to be less involved in campus life and student activities. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) support this notion stating that instead of fully committing to the transition to four-year colleges and universities, first generation college students tend to work more on campus, are more likely to live at home and commute to school, are more likely to enroll at two-year institutions, and are more likely to register for remedial classes.

Additionally, Brooks-Terry (1988), reports that first generation college students (a) overwhelmingly discontinue education in their first year, (b) experience conflicting loyalties between their college and off-campus friends and family, and (c) struggle adapting their values and attitudes to the newly introduced college culture.

The final theme of research conducted on this population focuses on how the campus climate affects this population and how these students interact with other students, faculty and staff. Terenzini and Springer (1996) found that students whose parents did not attend college are less likely to socialize with peers and talk with teachers in high school and that these behaviors continue in college with first generation students exhibiting lower levels of academic and social integration. Additionally, Terenzini and Springer report that first generation students are less likely than continuing-generation students to view faculty as concerned about their success.

### **Race, Class, and First Generation College Students**

Research clearly states that first generation college students have unique stressors that can prevent them from reaching their graduation goals. Hsiao (1992) found that first generation college students often face unique challenges in their quest for a degree such as conflicting obligations, false expectations, and lack of preparation or support.

Additionally, first generation college students experience contradictory relationships with family, peers, and community as well as struggle with issues such as guilt and stress. All are examples of the unique intrapersonal dynamics that these students battle with as they persist towards graduation. Thus, understanding the impact of the intersection of relevant cultural variables on individuals allows college administrators to develop more accurate and comprehensive retention programs and activities (Boyd-Franklin & Garcia-Preto, 1994; Chin, 1994).

### **Intrapersonal Dilemmas**

There are unique inter and intrapersonal conflicts and dilemmas faced by first generation college students as a result of the intersection of race and class. Gibbons and Shoffner (2004) contend that first generation students have unique needs that distinguish them from their peers. An example of these inimitable stressors is related to anxiety and guilt. Bui (2002) found that first generation students expressed a greater fear of failing in college, worried more about financial aid, and felt that they have to put more time into studying. Logan (2007) reporting similar findings, found that first generation students expressed feelings of inner conflict, guilt, betrayal, and loss when describing their attempts at balancing the demands of their culture of origin and their new college culture.

Piorkowski (1983) investigated the mental health issues of low income, urban and first generation college students by applying the concept of survivor guilt to this student population. Survivor guilt is defined as guilt associated with surviving a traumatic situation. Piorkowski noted that these students often encountered alcoholism, drug abuse, mental illness, family violence, and criminal behavior; many even experienced other emotional and psychosocial disasters associated with poverty. Findings illustrate that these students often questioned whether they should even be in college; students expressed their guilt stating: “Why should I succeed when they have failed?” and “Why should I survive when I didn’t help them enough so that they could succeed?” (p. 620). Piorkowski contends that students suffering from survivor guilt struggle with the idea of being more successful than their parents and family members. Her research found that many times these students are ridiculed, discouraged, and criticized by family members and peers for deciding to go to college. As a result, these students may become alienated from their families and communities (Striplin, 1999).

Whitten (1992) broadened Piorkowski’s concept of survivor guilt to survivor conflict, which includes a broader range of emotional reactions to survival such as anxiety and ambivalence. Whitten stated that survivor conflict manifests itself as one enters and progresses through college. It was noted that these feelings of guilt, ambivalence, anxiety, and depression are frequently sub-conscious and can be debilitating if not recognized and addressed. Whitten’s research concludes stating that these feelings can lead to students engaging in self-sabotage, procrastination, decreased productivity activities; and a devaluation of one’s self concept, accomplishments, and ambitions. It is critical for college administrators and practitioners to help these students to identify, understand, and develop coping skills to help resolve their unique stressors.

### **Family**

An extensive review of the literature finds that a multitude of researchers postulate that many family, siblings, and friends of first generation college students’ may not understand the benefits of the college experience; and although parents allow their children to pursue higher education they often contradict their consent with conflicting or negative messages (Hsiao, 1992). In fact, first-generation students are sometimes discouraged by their families from attending college (Striplin, 1999). One of the reasons why parents may dispirit their child is because they are depending on them to seek employment and contribute to the family income; thus resulting in the possibility of first generation students becoming disenfranchised with their family and community (Striplin, 1999).

Bui (2002) provides another unique stressor related to family dynamics, reporting that first generation students pursue higher education so that they can help out their families. These findings correlate with the findings of Piorkowski (1983), who states that some first generation college students may feel guilty about pursuing higher education while their families struggle financially to survive.

### **Community**

First generation college students have reported a sense of disconnection from their families, cultures of origin, and from the higher-education community (Rendon, 1992). Additionally, minority first generation students are challenged with trying to balance their home commitments and obligations, while trying to maintain peer and community relations along with following their dreams of going to and graduating from college (Schmidt, 2003).

### **Peer Influence**

Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) support the claim that peers may be extremely important in academic outcomes for students. Adolescents who have peers with higher educational aspirations are more likely to have a stronger academic self-concept, be more engaged in school, and to attend postsecondary educational institutions than peers with lower educational aspirations (Redd, Brooks, & McGarvey, 2002). Sadly, many first generation college students do not have peers who have higher education aspirations. Furthermore, these students are more likely to remain friends with peers from their community. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco, found that first generation college students reported a higher average on perceived support from non-college enrolled friends and second generation students reported higher perceived support from college enrolled friends

Dennis et al. (2005) offer that first generation college students do not need to make a lot of friends, but instead they need friends who provide them with the resources that will help them cope with the pressures of college life.

### **Positive Psychology**

According to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000), for many decades psychological research focused on understanding and treating negative human experiences. This practice is not consistent with the philosophy of positive psychology, which is grounded in finding the answer to the question ‘What is Right about People’ (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi contend that positive psychology does not focus on what is bad or wrong, instead the focus is on what people do right and concentrates on building strengths. The goal of positive psychology is to discover and encourage individual’s strengths, personal attributes, resources, and the assets that allow them to flourish and overcome obstacles; the mantra of Positive Psychology is to develop strengths and manage weaknesses (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

### **Hope Theory**

Hope, along with resilience, optimism, hardiness, strengths, wisdom, and happiness are examples of the many constructs that encompass positive psychology.

These variables are used to measure individual levels of human functioning, and happiness, as well as people's ability to realize their personal and academic potential (Seligman, 2002). Snyder's Hope theory draws from the basic idea that hope is an overall perception that one's goals can be met (Snyder, Sympson, Ybasco, Borders, Babyak, & Higgins, 1996). Hope is defined as "the process of thinking about ones goals along with the motivation toward those goals (agency) and the ways to achieve those goals (pathways)" (Snyder, 1995, p. 355).

### **Hope and Academics Success**

An extensive literature review yielded no research related to first generation college students and the hope construct. To date, there have been many studies conducted on traditional college students and only a few ethnic minority college students with regard to academic achievement and persistence. Of interest to note, however, is the fact that the available research confirms that hope correlates with superior academic performances at all levels of education and this truth bodes well for first generation students (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002).

The Hope scale was administered to first year students in a longitudinal study of 100 female and 100 male college students. Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon (2002) charted these students' progress for 6 years and found that the Hope Scale scores significantly predicted higher GPAs (2.85 compared to 2.43), higher graduation rates, and lower dropout rates. It is important to note that the predictive power of the Hope Scale scores remains significant when administrated to college students and controlling for intelligence, previous grade history, self-esteem, and entrance examination scores (Snyder, Wiklund & Cheavens, 1999).

Snyder, Rand, and Sigmon (2002) report that of the 3,287 college students who participated in a longitudinal study, 40.27% of low hope students graduated as compared to 56.50% of high hope students. The results of this investigation also found that students with higher scores on the Hope Scale were more likely to graduate even when ACT scores were taken into consideration.

### **High Hope Versus Low Hope College Students**

As a result of the numerous studies conducted on college students and academic success using Snyder's Hope Scale, a distinct profile of high hope and low hope college students now exists. Snyder et al. (1991) found that high hope college students are more inspired and confident. High Hope students also have high self worth and low levels of depression (Snyder et al., 1997). When confronted with stressors, higher hope students were found to possess the coping skills necessary to deal with their issues more effectively (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon 2002).

Moreover, a student with high levels of hope approaches problems with a focus on success, thus increasing the probability that they will succeed (Conti, 2000). According to Snyder, Lopez, Shorey, Rand, and Feldman (2003), low hope students may give up when they are faced with challenges, primarily because they cannot process other ways to triumph over their barriers. Furthermore, low hope students, when faced with challenges, experience more negative self-talk when taking tests compared to high hope scholars who experience less stress associated with test taking (Snyder, 1999).

High hope students track their academic progress and are better at breaking down assignments into small steps. In comparison low hope students; judge themselves to others based on perceived superiority; do not possess internal goals; and often times have too many aspirations which tend to be too big. To make matters worse, low hope students focus on how poorly they are doing (Michael, 2000), while high hope students see tests as challenges that they can overcome (Anderson, 1988). Finally, low hope students possess narrow perspectives and usually only have one way to aspire towards their goals while determined high hope students have multiple pathways and are open to exploring new possibilities (Tierney, 1995).

The essence of creating new and innovative strategies, techniques, and programs that are inspired by positive psychology, specifically hope, is to initiate a dialogue between campus stakeholders (college administrators, faculty, and student affairs personnel) and first generation college students to transfer knowledge regarding these students' needs. Helping students to match their motivation to graduate with the will power (agency) and way power (pathways) as suggested in Snyder's Hope Theory (Luthans & Jensen, 2002), is crucial to developing retention programs that identify and build upon these students strengths. To this end, the following section presents recommendations, activities, and programs that may help in discovering, honing, and developing first generation college student's level of hope which may improve their GPA, retention, and graduation rates as is the case with traditional college students (Snyder, Cheavens, & Michael, 1999).

### **Instituting Hope Inspired Retention Programs**

Altering and/or instilling hope in students is a developmental process, which means that there is an opportunity for campus faculty and staff to build on existing student strengths and enhance their agency and pathway thinking. The ultimate goal of creating a hope inspired retention model is "to help students discover, develop and apply their strengths and talents so that they will persist, achieve and gain maximum benefits from the college experience" (Anderson, 2004 p. 26). This view of retention is contradictory to many of the models that are currently used to retain students. Conventional retention models tend to focus on looking at the student/institution fit or they center mainly on creating academic programs that address students' deficiencies; these strategies are not the best option when working with students of color or first generation college students (Torres, 2006).

To achieve a fundamental change in retention philosophy and interventions, campus stakeholders must embrace a holistic outlook, one that considers the complexities of college students (Helms & Cook, 1999). Helms and Cook (1999) believe that college counselors are most equipped to take a leadership role and serve as the catalysts for this modification to the current retention paradigm.

### **College Counselors**

Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito (1998) state that most administrators and faculty members are not trained to handle the variety of cultural influences and the different levels of oppression that first generation college students possess. Conversely, for the most part, college counselors are knowledgeable of how important variables such

as race, ethnicity, and social class are and how these variables must be viewed dynamically rather than statically (Constantine, 2001). College counselors can act as conduits and initiators and work collaboratively with campus stakeholders to embrace the concept of shared power in identifying students' strengths (Goodman et al., 2004). Facilitating peer groups, the strongest single source of influence on student development (Astin, 1996), is one way counselors, staff and students can work together to get a better idea of the issues and solutions needed to create new retention activities.

### **Focus Groups/Small Group**

Discovering and identifying existing first generation college students strengths and creating and implementing hope inspired retention activities is an important element of developing a new retention program. The use of focus groups may allow shareholders to realize the unique issues that these students are challenged with as they matriculate towards graduation. Coyle (1998) asserts that focus groups may be more 'empowering' than other investigative techniques. These groups are particularly sensitive to cultural values, which is especially relevant for college-age students who may differ culturally in terms of their language and acculturation to views shared by their adult researchers (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992; Flores & Alonso, 1995). Listening to current students as they explain their college experience is the most important first step in the development of a retention model that is centered on ascertaining and increasing student's strengths.

A second step in commencing the process of teaching, developing, and nurturing hope activities can be accomplished by using first year seminars, also called retention courses. These courses may be an ideal avenue to train faculty and students about hope, positive psychology, and strengths based interventions.

### **First Year Experience Courses**

According to Davig and Spain (2004) first-term success courses are one of the more effective retention efforts put forth by higher education institutions. Therefore these classes would be an ideal medium in which to begin the process of initiating change in the thinking and understanding of the strengths possessed by first generation college students.

Many of these courses focus on helping students learn about the institutions and the services offered as well as help students gain study skills and integrate into all facets of the university (Hodum, & Martin, 1994). These course goals can be accomplished using a hope or strength based curriculum which in turn will begin the process of developing a culture of hope.

### **Teachers as Transmitters of Hope Inspired Classrooms**

The most important element of being a hope inspired teacher is spending time with and caring for students (Snyder, 2005). Setting goals for the class, holding students accountable for their thoughts and deeds, creating goals and pathways as well as class goals are other traits of a hope inspired instructor (Snyder, 2005). It is clear that there are many advantages that are associated with establishing a campus of hope inspired students and teachers; therefore, it may be prudent to begin identifying and investigating the



specific strengths and resources that first generation college students possess and build upon them. Snyder, Shorey, et al.'s (2002) research consistently finds that when students understand how to set goals and pursue them, they feel good about themselves and are more apt to perform better academically and graduate.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Student attrition at most colleges and universities in the United States has increased at alarming rates over the years (Bradburn, 2002); it is estimated that 40% of college students will leave higher education without getting a degree (Porter, 1990). Consequently, there are few problems in higher education that receive more attention than retention (Tinto, 1987).

First generation college students are affected unevenly concerning attrition and as a result, substantial inequities exist in relation to educational attainment based on race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Gladieux & Swail, 1998). Nonetheless, this unique college student population continues to enroll in college, and very soon they will represent the majority of all college students. When these students are provided with the appropriate retention strategies that addresses both their academic and non academic challenges, they are more apt to persist and graduate from college. However, they are rarely afforded these opportunities by higher education administrators and practitioners because they often are not attuned to their unique academic and social needs. Thus, knowingly or unknowingly, college administrators perpetuate the oppressive system that these students have been subjected to their entire lives.

Snyder's Hope Theory provides promising outcomes regarding academic success and persistence; however, hope inspired activities and strategies. It is the authors' contention that these strategies should be applied specifically to first generation college students in order to positively affect their ability to persist and graduate.

Research must be conducted on first generation college students in relationship with hope to further support the hypothesis set forth in this article. In addition, it is vital to determine if there is a relationship between hope, ethnicity, and income level. Results from these studies would help in determining if Snyder's Hope Theory is an appropriate model to apply to first generation college students. Higher education policymakers have many daunting priorities that they must accomplish with limited budgets and limited human resources. That being said, enhancing students' ability to graduate must remain one of their utmost priorities.

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