An Examination of High-Impact Strategies That Increase Success in Marginalized Student Groups

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Low-income, first-generation (LIFG) student college enrollment has been steadily increasing over the last decade. This group of marginalized students is typically overlooked as needing additional support as they often lack any visual indicators of their LIFG status. LIFG students arrive on campus with unique goals, stories, and challenges but often lack college-going knowledge and capital.

This research utilizes a grounded theory approach regarding the current body of data. The data provides a detailed student profile, including rationale for the need for institutional and classroom change, as well as an overview of the unique challenges faced by this group of students. Research-based institutional and classroom strategies have been coded and comprise of three main categories: cost, intrusive advising, and co- or extra-curricular offerings. The importance of faculty's role is examined. Additionally, the significance of a culturally compassionate and sensitive curriculum and communication style is considered.

Low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students are enrolling into academia at rates higher than ever before. However, these students are less likely to persist from one school year to another when compared with their more affluent peers (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). This troubling trend has garnered much attention in recent years as the nation moves toward discussions on racial and social equity. A large body of literature currently exists, all seeking to answer the same question: Are there specific strategies or andragogical approaches in existence that increase success for marginalized student groups, primarily those from a low-income, first-generation background?

The current set of available data, when examined, seem to exhibit several commonalities which illustrate a group of best practices to address the success and achievement gap within this group. Literature utilized in this study is from several unconnected projects from a variety of scholarly review journals where LIFG student success strategies were the focus, and each study discovered similar results and identify several approaches demonstrated to increase student success for members in these marginalized groups.

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This research explores these factors as well as ongoing barriers to collegiate success faced by this marginalized group of students. Additionally, the importance of familial and institutional support, the critical role of faculty, and successful interventions will be examined.

Review of the Literature

Enrollment data from the 2015–2016 school year reported by the Center for First-Generation Student Success (2016) claim 56% of college freshmen were considered first-generation, meaning neither of their parents have a bachelor's degree. This number has grown exponentially since 1995–1996, when only 34% of the student body at four-year institutions was considered first-generation (Pascarella et al., 2004). Studies (e.g., see Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018; Rondini, 2016; Low et al., 2016; Ting, 1998) have demonstrated that first-generation status oftentimes coincides with students living in poverty, at a low-income level, or sometimes even in homelessness. According to the United States Office of Postsecondary Education (2020), a family of four in the contingent United States is considered low income with a salary of $39,300 or below.

Despite these barriers, low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students are enrolling at an astounding rate but, unfortunately, these students do not persist beyond their second or third year (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). Mamiseishvili's (2011) longitudinal study found only 11% of LIFG students completed a bachelor's degree within six years. As comparison, 55% of their more affluent peers persisted through degree completion. Factors impacting persistence were found to include feelings of isolation (Jehangir, 2009), inability to secure a support system (Yeh, 2010), understanding of faculty expectations, and inability to adjust to the "college student" role (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

Several pedagogical approaches, classroom strategies, and interventions have demonstrated to be beneficial for all students, but particularly LIFG students. Hao (2011) praises Compassionate Pedagogy as one solution as it allows for the examination of institutional policies and classroom practices that put these disadvantaged students even farther behind the eight ball. This pedagogical approach is a process in which faculty and staff must teach students how to communicate effectively using "four components: observation, feeling, need, and request" (Hao, 2011, p. 92). Culturally responsive pedagogy has also shown to be beneficial to LIFG students, especially those from ethnically diverse backgrounds (Glass et al., 2017). This approach promotes analysis of cultural differences in the learning processes and address curriculum to increase feeling of belonging and campus engagement.

Additionally, simple strategies both in and out of the classroom help LIFG students succeed (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009; Miller, 2013). These strategies include intrusive advising (McMurry & Sorrells, 2009), faculty making first contact outside the classroom (Collier & Morgan, 2007), additional summer programming (Renbarger & Long, 2019), and using illustrative examples (McMurray & Sorrells). Learning experiences outside of the classroom also prove to be constructive for LIFG students. Conley and Hamlin (2009) provide that justice-learning supports marginalized students by engaging them in processes that investigate concepts of privilege, power, and difference. Service-learning provides opportunities to build skills related to academia and possible career choices and creates connections to real life for personal student development (Yeh, 2010).

Methodology

Grounded theory, as a method of comparative analysis was used for 37 articles from scholarly peer-reviewed journals, including Journal of College Student Development and Innovative Higher Education. Articles were randomly selected from several database searches using the terms "low-income," "first-generation," and "success strategies." These articles were reviewed, analyzed, and coded into several specific categories. Some data did not answer the guiding research question but provided a rationality and context for this research, including developing a student profile made up of commonalities including issues with homelessness, the impact of parent or familial influence, social class, and individual student motivation.

Findings

Upon review of the selected literature, three major themes began to emerge. The types of support LIFG students respond most positively to can be categorized within the lenses of institutional support, faculty support, or parental/familial support. Working through this first step of open coding, an additional theme emerged but not one supporting the research question. This emerging data provided insight and details of the modern LIFG student. Due to the large number of articles in the sample including this information, "other" was added. Axial coding allowed for "other" to be redefined to "student profile."

Selective coding was used to develop a very specific profile for the modern LIFG student. Using selective coding for data focusing on the guiding research question, specific targeted strategies and several andragogical approaches were discovered. Interlinking institutional supports demonstrated to benefit LIFG students and increase their success. These institutional supports included cost, intrusive advising methods, and access to extracurricular activities. Faculty played a huge role in rates of success in this marginalized student group by implementing compassionate cultural andragogy and communication approaches as well as providing service- and justice-learning opportunities.

Several articles were singularly focused, somewhat limiting the number of applicable codes. However, these articles provide additional information or data to support the emerging theories from the coding process. Article 9, for example, provided information on institutional supports alone.

Student Profile

In 2007 nearly 3.5 million low-income (LI), K–12 students demonstrated the ability to perform at the top academic quartile (Hébert, 2018). Many of these high-achieving LIFG students arrive to academia underprepared or unprepared due, in part, to lacking rigorous curriculum in high school (Wilson, 2016), misunderstanding collegiate applications and processes (Hoxby & Turner, 2015), familial codependency (Hand & Payne, 2008), and financial strain (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Mamiseishvili, 2010). This lack of preparedness oftentimes results in poor transitions into college (Pascarella et al., 2004). However, with academic and social support, additional guidance (Renbarger & Long, 2019), and institutional interventions (Watt et al., 2011), these LIFG students have demonstrated the ability to perform at the highest possible level.

Table 1. *Axial Coding*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
Institutional	x	x	x	x	x	x			x								x	x	x	x	x				x			x	x		x	x		x	x		x
Faculty			x	x	x	x		x												x					x			x	x		x				x		x
Parental								x		x							x					x	x							x			x				
Other							x				x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x				x	x	x	x	x	x	x				x			x	

Table 2. *Selective Coding for Institutional Supports*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
Cost	x	x						x							x	x	x	x				x	x	x					x	x		x		x	x	x	x
Intrusive Advising		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x				x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
Access to Extracurriculars	x			x		x	x				x	x	x	x		x	x		x		x	x	x		x	x		x						x	x		

Table 3. *Selective Coding for Classroom Supports*

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34	35	36	37
Cultural Andragogy	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Compassionate Communication	x	x	x	x	x	x		x		x	x		x			x	x		x	x	x				x	x	x	x			x	x	x		x		x
Service Learning	x		x	x		x	x						x	x					x						x			x	x	x	x			x	x		x
Justice Learning	x		x	x		x	x						x	x					x						x			x	x	x	x			x	x		x

Self-efficacy, one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations or accomplish a task, also impacts a student's ability at the postsecondary level. According to Ramos-Sánchez and Nichols (2007), LIFG students are often deficient in this area. Self-efficacy has been demonstrated as a predictor of collegiate GPA, persistence (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Green, 2006), and motivation (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017). Lacking self-efficacy will often impact an LIFG student's collegiate choice (Hébert, 2018; Hand & Payne, 2008; Green, 2006), major (Pulliam et al., 2017), and even the type of courses they enroll in (Ortagus, 2017).

Despite most LIFG students receiving substantial financial aid packages (Azmitia et al., 2018), with 38% of undergraduate students receiving a Pell Grant (Mead, 2018), many still must hold a job (e.g., see Pike & Kuh, 2005; Ortagus, 2016; Hinz, 2016). Balancing school and work impact these LIFG students by limiting any additional time (Katrevich & Aruguete, 2017) to potentially be used to participate in cocurricular and extracurricular activities (e.g., see Glass et al., 2017; Schademan & Thompson, 2015), or engage in meaningful social relationships with peers and faculty. This blatant lack of supportive relationships typically results in overwhelming feelings of loneliness and isolation, thus eventually leading to student dropout (Jehangir, 2008; Martin, 2015).

Parental Influences

It should come as no surprise that the level of parental and familial support plays an important role in the development of student self-efficacy and motivation. Most LIFG students experience a fierce sense of community (Rondini, 2016) and connection unique to their social class. These relationships, both to family and community, can sometimes cause students to develop "imposter syndrome"—the inability to believe individual success is deserved or has been achieved via personal effort and skill. This imposter syndrome can generate guilt and potentially impact college choice (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Impact of social class

According to Rondini (2016), most LIFG students hail from working-class families. These families typically have little, if any, knowledge of the college-going process (Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018). Due to this lack of educational attainment, individuals from these families often fail to understand the cultural, institutional, and societal barriers in place that perhaps had an impact on their academic success (Rondini). Despite this lack of success, many families held postsecondary education in the highest esteem, and those involved in the student's education had a positive impact on educational persistence and outcomes (Mitchall & Jaegar, 2018).

Class can be impacted by a variety of factors. Martin (2015) found work and family responsibilities were more often barriers rather than negative interactions with more affluent peers; however, both play a critical role. Stressing one's class experiences, "socioeconomic background influenced every aspect of the college experience" (Martin, p. 277); but for many, escaping such a stifling home environment was a testament to the level of commitment in attending and persisting throughout college (Martin). This juxtaposition between familial background and career goals may cause many LIFG or working-class students to experience class transition and begin to subconsciously adapt their language and behaviors to mirror that of the upper and middle class (Hinz, 2016). Hinz attributes this to the tough decision these students are often faced with, as "working-class students must eventually decide whether they want to identify with the working class or the middle class, because the two are fundamentally opposed" (Hinz, p. 287).

This comparison of class identity can oftentimes cause tension between individual identity and perceived social expectations (Means & Pyne, 2017). Students also perceive the need for multiplicity (Pizzolato et al., 2008) to maintain their cultural background and succeed in the middle class. Unfortunately, many LIFG and working-class students felt their individual experiences and identities were not always recognized or accepted at their institution (Means & Pyne, 2017).

This phenomenon can be especially problematic for white LIFG students. White LIFG students are often lost in the fray because they look the same as their more affluent peers (Martin, 2015). This oftentimes leads to a lack of institutional encouragement for this marginalized group. These students access fewer support offices or programs (Moschetti & Hudley, 2008), as many are not marketed to them specifically, potentially impeding their success. This lack of institutional support demonstrates the amount of remaining inequity present in current policies at institutions of higher learning (Taylor & Cantwell, 2018), which only creates additional barriers for these students to traverse.

Homelessness

Many LIFG students experienced what Low et al. (2017) refer to as "doubled-up homelessness" at least once in their lifetime. Doubled-up homelessness refers to students involuntarily living in a residence with one or more families (Low et al., 2017). These students are also referred to as high mobile youth and account for 75% of the homeless students attending public school (Low et al., 2017). These students often go unnoticed or unsupported because they do not meet the ideal of homelessness (Low et al., 2017). According to Low et al., these students have poor academic goals, struggle with truancy, may demonstrate poor behavior, and have consistently lower GPAs than their non-homeless peers (2017).

Support and motivation

Student motivation can be determined and impacted by familial support (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018). Even though most LIFG students hail from families with little to no information about the college-going process, parental/guardian motivation and support play a key role (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) determined most LIFG students come from one of two different homelife structures: informational or permissive environment. An informational environment "provides a feedback structure that enable the child to have a sense of competency to master the environment" (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018, p. 585); an informational environment provides rules and consequences and stability—the student learns and becomes proficient in his/her situation. Contrasting the informational environment is what Mitchall and Jaeger call the permissive environment which "does not provide adequate rules or boundaries … critical for understanding … competency and autonomy" (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018, p 585). A permissive environment is often inconsistent, unstable, and provides the student with little, if any, hands-on guidance.

Perhaps the most important component of familial support is the gift of choice. Students whose parents supported educational pursuits and offered guidance, but ultimately left the choice of college and major to the student (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018), were most resilient and comfortable in their college choice process. According to Mitchall and Jaeger (2018), parents who were active participants in the application and financial aid process, even with little knowledge, demonstrated a positive impact on motivation. Additionally, high academic expectations, positive feedback, validation, and encouragement were all positive contributors to student motivation and self-determination (Mitchall & Jaeger, 2018).

Institutional Support

There are several opportunities for post-secondary institutions to provide support to increase the likelihood of LIFG students' success. These simple institutional shifts have demonstrated increases in all student success, especially those in marginalized groups. These supports include intrusive academic advising, financial aid advising (Wiggins, 2011), individualized degree plans (Miller, 2013), facilitating time to build strong instructor-student relationships (Schademan & Thompson, 2015), and explicitness in expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2007). All these simple adjustments have shown to assist LIFG students in adapting to the college student role (Collier & Morgan, 2007) and learn to balance this new responsibility with others (Schademan & Thompson, 2015).

Cost

It comes as no surprise that cost is sometimes a determining factor in the decision to attend and remain in college. The availability and extent of financial aid packages, including scholarships, has positively impacted academic outcome for LIFG students (Renbarger & Long, 2019). The financial stress often limits college choice for even the highest achievers among this low-income, first-generation population. These financial concerns cause most LIFG students to choose institutions closer to home (Hébert, 2018), regardless of reputation or degree offerings (Taylor & Cantwell, 2018).

Many students must work to cover basic expenses, sometimes working two or more jobs. These jobs, while necessary, may prevent full engagement on campus (Glass et al., 2017). This is especially true for nontraditional students who are often LIFG. Work, family, and other stressors often contribute to decisions to persist or withdraw (Hébert, 2018). Many of these students reported considering returning to complete the final 6–12 credit honors to obtain a degree but only if the institution would offer those final credits for free or even at a discounted rate (Bers & Schuetz, 2014).

Intrusive advising

Intrusive advising has indicated to have positive implications on LIFG student success. For this process to be effective, an established line of communication should be in place to promote supportive relationships between students and faculty (Watt et al., 2011). To develop this relationship, intrusive advising can begin with casual conversation. McMurray and Sorrells (2009) offer to ask “questions related to students’ hometown, parents’ occupations, siblings, interests, and campus involvement” (p. 211). This unpremeditated approach promotes interpersonal connection between faculty and student (Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

This personal approach oftentimes makes it easier to identify potential academic, financial, and social problems (Miller, 2013). Unfortunately, it may become difficult in determining who should initiate these conversations (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Collier and Morgan point out the misunderstanding of faculty office hours and how one professor explained them explicitly: "I sit in that office waiting for you to come and talk to me. If you choose not to, that's okay but I am here for you" (2008, p. 434). Regrettably, many LIFG students struggle in asking for help, as they do not want to be perceived as unprepared or unintelligent (Hao, 2011). Hao (2011) argues offering additional support, including appointments with LIFG students during office hours, may improve academic success. This continued exposure (Miller, 2013) may help alleviate stress related to alienation (Schademan & Thompson, 2015) and isolation.

Extracurricular activities

Extracurricular activities often become the conduit for LIFG students when considering persisting in academia from one year to the next (Glass et al., 2017). However, due in part to other responsibilities, many LIFG students are not given equal opportunities to participate (Glass et al., 2017). A truly student-centered institution puts great effort into understanding the students in which it serves (Miller, 2013). For organizations whose student body is comprised of many LIFG students, reevaluation of extra- and co-curricular activities may be beneficial (Wiggins, 2011). Perhaps most important are the days and times in which these events occur (Glass et al., 2017), as many LIFG students have other responsibilities—family and employment (Martin, 2015)—that impede the ability to participate during certain hours. This lack of engagement on campus has shown to increase LIFG feelings of isolation (Hao, 2011) which can result in drop-out (Wiggins, 2011).

Importance of Faculty

Enrollment data for 2015 showed 24% of the undergraduate population was composed of LIFG students (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). With the increase of enrollment for this population, colleges and universities should examine policies and procedures that may be barriers for collegiate and career success (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Institutional change comes with resistance and can get caught up in bureaucratic red tape. Increasing the likelihood of success for LIFG students frequently becomes the responsibility of faculty. Fortunately, data reflects positive impact from faculty when the adjustments to classroom strategies and the andragogical approach are made (Schademan & Thompson, 2015).

Andragogy

Data demonstrates three main andragogical approaches faculty can take to increase the success of LIFG students: relational (Schademan & Thompson, 2015), culturally responsive (Glass et al., 2017), and critical compassionate (Hao, 2011; Wiggins, 2011) andragogy. Each of these approaches contain similarities which incorporate authentic relationship building, explicit communication, and additional assistance outside the classroom. All these approaches can help create classrooms and institutions where all students, especially marginalized groups like LIFG, can feel safe and be successful.

Relational andragogy places emphasis on the role of a "positive and supportive teacher" (Schademan & Thompson, 2015, p. 211). This is essential to relational andragogy as the relationship between teacher and student can be instrumental in decreasing feelings of isolation (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). According to Schademan & Thompson (2015), faculty who develop authentic relationships with LIFG students can become powerful cultural agents of change. These agents of change can become instrumental in prompting classroom (Schademan & Thompson, 2015), cultural (Hao, 2011), and community engagement (Yeh, 2010). Classroom and instructional strategies of relational andragogy include close monitoring and discussion of student progress, understanding additional student responsibilities, and reaching out first when a student is seemingly struggling with workload (Shademan & Thompson, 2015).

Culturally responsive andragogy places focus on "improving outcomes for all students" (Glass et al., 2017, p. 898). This improvement typically comes with exploration, analysis, and discussion of student perspectives (Glass et al., 2017) on barriers impacting success. During this process, students' worldview may be challenged (Glass et al., 2017) as their perceptions of actual barriers change. The most important factor in culturally responsive andragogy may be the active engagement in cultural differences, especially in the learning process (Glass et al., 2017). This acknowledgment of learning variations can create a classroom space where LIFG students feel comfortable, appreciated, and valued (Hand & Payne, 2008), ultimately decreasing their feelings of marginalization. Classroom strategies for culturally responsive andragogy includes enhancing a sense of community, honoring diversity and internationalism, as well as offering academic challenge with additional support (Glass et al., 2017) as needed.

Critical compassionate andragogy can generate unease for instructors and faculty as it promotes "educators to criticize institutional and classroom practices that ideologically place underserved students at disadvantaged positions" (Hao, 2011, p. 92). Ideally, this approach aims to investigate not just educational policy but social justice (Hao, 2011) as well as any race or class barriers (Wiggins, 2011) the student may face. At the core of critical compassionate andragogy is compassionate communication which aims to minimize violence and defensiveness while improving communication skills that promote addressing issues of personal concern (Hao, 2011). In the classroom, critically compassionate practitioners closely observe their students, specifically learning styles and peer interaction, discussing observations with the student, and asking for specific feedback or strategies the student feels would be beneficial to his/her success (Hao, 2011).

Service- and Justice-Learning

Community service has been found to be a positive predictor in LIFG student collegiate GPA as well as post-secondary persistence (Yeh, 2010). Unfortunately, many marginalized students are not afforded such opportunities in middle or high school (Green, 2006) and often struggle to take advantage of such offerings on campus due to cost or job responsibilities (Hinz, 2016). Service-learning is an instructional strategy that allows LIFG students an opportunity to engage meaningfully in their community and has "been positively linked to students' personal development, racial and cultural understanding, civic engagement, [and] academic learning" (Yeh, p. 51). Service-learning experiences support LIFG students in generating social and cultural capital via networking. LIFG students involved in Yeh's study demonstrated service-learning experiences allowed them to build transferable skills and develop understanding of their community, increase personal resiliency, discover meaning in career choice, and develop a critical consciousness (2010).

The positive influences of justice-learning experiences are similar. Justice-learning differs from service-learning as it aims to "confront and destabilize … students' initial views of privilege, power, and difference" (Conley & Hamlin, 2009, p.47). Using a justice-learning approach often allows for students to develop agency on campus and within their communities (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). An important factor of justice-learning is the connection of academic content with civic engagement and real-life policies and practices that impede marginalized groups (Conley & Hamlin, 2009). Ultimately, the goal of justice-learning is to promote students to "explore and reflect upon their own social positioning" (Conley & Hamlin, p. 52) in order to address barriers they may encounter.

Implications and Conclusion

LIFG students make up a substantial part of the collective collegiate student body (Center for First Generation Student Success, 2016) and it is unlikely that this trend will go away anytime soon. To help these students, colleges and universities should begin investigating and adjusting policies and procedures that may inhibit or otherwise negatively impact these students, including the application process (Hoxby & Turner, 2015), unclear degree plans (Bers & Schuetz, 2014), and lack of on-campus employment opportunities (Mamiseishvili, 2010).

Faculty are perhaps the most critical (Glass et al., 2017) in ensuring the success of LIFG students as they can become important agents of change (Schademan & Thompson, 2015). Through simple adjustments in classroom strategy and exploration of specific andragogical approaches (Conley & Hamlin, 2009; Yeh, 2010), low-income, first-generation students can persist, succeed, and thrive.

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