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Helping First-Generation Students Navigate College

Regarding first-generation college students (FGS), writing center conversations surrounding this particular group are interesting in that, as a first generation university undergrad myself, I realize the difficulties this title comes with – along with the unique challenges of attending college for the first time in and of itself. While access to a college education has become increasingly more open, there is arguably a large gap when referring to the *quality* of pre-college educational resources provided; those who gain access to college are usually the students who performed well in high school. While universities may understand this problem – and have done much in the way of bridging this gap – transitioning to college life is still challenging when students are not familiar with the culture surrounding academia (especially in regard to students not knowing or understanding how to navigate this new world, namely, where to find resources and when to ask for help). Lack of familiarity with university culture as a whole can make FGS not fully grasp what they need to do to succeed, resulting in feelings of isolation, intimidation, stress, self-doubt, low confidence, etc.; they also do not typically understand what exactly they need to do in order to succeed—as in my case freshman year. This argument is important for writing centers as there is a substantial gap in the cognitive *and* confidence level of first-gen students and, consequently, how able they are to use their abilities and communicate their ideas. Writing centers being available to and supporting first-generation college students could not only improve their social/academic integration, but also result in the students’

knowledge gap lessening – meaning they grow more confident in their abilities and overall become better prepared for the academic challenges of college.

To give first-generation students the support they need to thrive, WC staff must understand what disadvantages set them apart from the average college student. While they make up more than 30% of the undergraduate student population of today, around 3/5 won't actually graduate with a bachelor's degree, and then even fewer attend graduate school (Balemian & Feng). This data can be ultimately be boiled down to first-generation students lacking "important 'college knowledge' centering around the "process of preparing, applying, and paying" for their schooling due in part to the families' lack of experience with postsecondary education, meaning they are easily overwhelmed—and, subsequently, unable to balance—the workload and responsibilities that come with university life (Balemian & Feng). An additional factor seen to consistently widen the educational gap between the two groups comes from first-gen students' demonstrated pre-college academic abilities, rather, the "amount of time spent studying in high school" factored in with their grade averages and "academic self-confidence" (Balemian & Feng). Because many are not able to benefit or learn from parental experience, they do not know "how to debate without arguing, where the boundaries are in the classroom, and what behavior is appropriate." This often means they are perceived as disrespectful, unfocused, and lazy when it is exactly the opposite (Greenwald). Other problems include overwhelming family responsibilities, low self-confidence, weak math and English skills, and inadequate study skills (Stebbleton & Soria). With this in mind, many educators realize that first-generation students may have both hefty responsibilities in addition to weak study skills and, when combined, may cause even greater challenges to reaching their goals (Stebbleton & Soria). Greenwald goes on to say

that, if possible, one should separate the problematic behavior from the person to better help them.

Other than those specified factors, many first-generation students do not understand the idea of majors (which is why they change them so many times) and instead think of it as a career choice (ex. accounting, business). This sentiment is echoed by Mellissa Young, that most first-generation students require “more time to declare a major and are more likely to switch majors.” They steer clear of abstract or unclear majors (ex. philosophy, sociology, history) because they aren’t sure what to do with it or what their options are for it (Greenwald). Due to outside demands concerning family and work, first-generation students tend not to be as academically engaged in their university when compared to non-FG students (Stebbleton & Soria). Being academically engaged on campus or otherwise at a university level requires students to open up to new ideas, endeavors, challenges, and differences – overall just becoming vulnerable – something that is not a common trait found among working-class or first-gen students. Being vulnerable can be seen as a sign of weakness – something that is to be avoided or, at the very least, hidden. For this reason, many first-generation students do not know how to process simple things, such as criticism for their work, and then take it personally (Greenwald). Given the information provided, the substantial need for writing center intervention is readily apparent to mend the gap between students’ preparedness and subsequent collegiate expectations.

Many first-generation students struggle with feelings of ‘otherness,’ inadequacy, or just not being up to par with the typical college student—traits which are most commonly thought of as Imposter Syndrome. They are often bridging two cultures together and not feeling a sense of belonging in either one (Young). Because of this, they often see the writing center as a place

only for struggling students needing help, resulting in avoiding it as they do not want to be perceived as weak or as someone who doesn't belong in the university. Tutoring specifically geared toward first-generation students who are not well-equipped for the realities of college writing or university life in general can improve their self-perceptions and confidence levels. By having a support system and role models concerning university writing centers, students would then be better equipped to deal with faculty expectations. Writing centers are in a position to help students understand that learning for the sake of learning and improving are key to honing better critical thinking skills that will be useful in the long run regarding life as an undergraduate. Everyone has the ability to write but I believe learning to engage in writing center practices means learning to articulate themselves in a clear and efficient manner more suited to formal academic standards.

Success in college is not just a matter of students demonstrating academic ability, as, in addition to academic skills, they must master the role of the "college student" in order to understand instructors' expectations and, thus, successfully meet those expectations (Collier & Morgan). Looking between faculty members' expectations and students' understanding of said expectations means being able to highlight differences concerning issues of time management and specific expectations regarding coursework. This need is most clearly reflected in the demand placed on students to work hard outside of the classroom (something they are most likely unfamiliar with). This is where the role of writing centers come into play, as a visit to the WC could help them to understand their role as a college student by connecting them to peers who are facing the same problems (ex. professor concerns) and foster a sense of community, particularly for those students who are not receiving sufficient support elsewhere. University writing centers can be an essential resource for giving students a place of support and

community, somewhere they can: talk about their writing, create writing groups, and further motivating and supporting other students through other writing projects.

One area to which faculty devoted considerable attention was the explicitness of their expectations concerning written assignments. These included expectations that students should: “have basic writing skills, such as, spelling, sentence structure, and demonstrate a coherent use of paragraphs; know how to put a paper together on a computer; and, be able to cite references in their papers using accepted guidelines” (Collier & Morgan). One professor is quoted saying, “I made an assumption they knew [APA or MLA style] and most people do not.” All agreed that it was essential to improve faculty–student communication to better increase the chance of student success, but there was much less agreement about whose responsibility it was to initiate those conversations or when this should happen. First-generation students did agree that they should take the initiative and introduce themselves to the professor to try to establish some rapport, and also “hoped this would make communication easier in the future” (Collier & Morgan). In contrast, the professors felt that the real issue was the students’ failure to communicate about problems when they encountered them. Faculty members expressed considerable frustration over the fact that their continued efforts to communicate their expectations clearly often failed to produce the desired results; although, at the same time they also recognized that the things they said did not seem to mean the same things to students as they did to them (ex. format issues, citation errors, etc.).

By having the writing center open as a viable option to students for clarification (as professors do not always clarify their meaning), I believe this would foster a greater sense of confidence and understanding in first-generation students. Additionally, developing a sense of self-confidence would help students grow in their perceptions of themselves. This newfound

confidence would additionally help the student build a better rapport with said professors. The students' perceptions of all the resources and information given to them combine to form their beliefs (and others' beliefs) of their own ability to succeed. (Notably, Stebleton and Soria argue that first-generation students who attend large research universities experience these obstacles more frequently than first-generation students at smaller, liberal art institutions due to the size of the universities). By helping students believe in themselves and their steps towards their future, writing centers can outline examples for students and faculty alike in regard to nurturing academic confidence.

Some steps (taken from an actual writing center) toward faculty-student relationship growth say to:

1. Use rubrics
 2. Provide examples of strong and weak work
 3. Briefly explain your teaching approaches, as this helps students understand what they are expected to do to succeed and how your approaches will help them learn
 4. Communicate high expectations
 5. Offer constructive criticism that acknowledges students' strengths
 6. Engage with students outside of class meetings
 7. Encourage students to seek appropriate help
 8. Make help-seeking an integral part of important class activities
 9. Include information on various university support services in your syllabus
- (Ortega-Villalobos).

Ortega later goes on to explain that by recognizing and addressing concerns specific to first-generation students, faculty could help to validate their struggles (feeling different, having to work harder than other students, self-doubt) could in turn help students build confidence.

As writing center tutors and educators seek to develop strategies to help students in achieving academic excellence, they may find value in services looking to foster growth inside and outside of the college classroom (Stebbleton & Soria). Tutors, and other educators alike can all benefit from being aware of challenges faced by first-generation students. These students often *do* realize that they need assistance to address the barriers they face toward academic success – whether that be additional academic advising or tutorial services – and outreach programs could help students “reduce the size of each step” during the adjustment period to college (Stebbleton & Soria). This, in turn, would help first-generation students feel a greater sense of ease, control, and responsibility during their college transition. They further recommended that the transition to college can be helped through targeted advising, tutoring, and mentoring by faculty and peers – notably by peer mentoring programs that pair upper-class students with entering first-year students, which has shown to be effective within these groups (Stebbleton & Soria).

Writing center staff should also implement learning options to first-generation students, like programs specifically targeted to first-generation students or focus on a specific area such as writing or speaking skills, as, by participating in these types of initiatives, first-generation students may gain confidence in areas that may be perceived as a barrier to success (Stebbleton and Soria). Another option given to WC staff is for them to consider engaging said students in discussions related to their unique, first-generation student experience. When working with students who may be struggling with confidence, staff can ask students if they are the first in the

family to attend college and “encourage a dialogue focused on common concerns faced by first-generation students” (Stebbleton & Storia). As first-generation students may feel a cultural, social, and emotional disconnect from campus life, staff can help ground them and guide them through their academic troubles.

Tutors can take extra measures to help first-generation students to feel like they belong on campus, “that they are genuine members of campus life who can achieve academic success.” By staffing tutors who were/are first-gen themselves, writing centers could better relate to and understand their experiences and serve as an example of one who made it (Stebbleton & Storia). Fostering long-term relationships and communications is ideal to developing overall confidence and self-assuredness within students, whether that be: through a monthly newsletter or email to students, congratulating students on their successes (e.g., end of the semester celebrations or official events), involving family members in acknowledgement ceremonies, and supporting students as they cross important milestones (from their first year to second year, etc.). As stated, these are all ways in which writing centers can support first-generation students in the most direct way.

With that being said, in regard to schoolwork, professorial expectations and students’ misunderstanding of said expectations should also be a concerning problem to staff. Professors can “explicitly [state] the issues that they encountered in dealing with students’ ability to understand and follow their expectations” (Collier & Morgan). Although there were disciplinary differences among faculty that reflected in content, almost every instructor “shared their frustrations” with students’ comprehension of “their basic expectations.” While the details of assignments, course structures, etc. vary in terms of discipline and professor, the underlying issue is still going to be the same: each student was unable to recognize and fulfill what

constituted as following academic guidelines. Faculty members' concerns regarding students' problems boil down to, "You can tell them, but they have to kind of go through the process to see just what you're referring to up front. Until they actually experience it, I do not think they fully get it" (Collier and Morgan). I believe this is where WC services come into play, as a way to help foster and grow students' abilities and confidence levels. By building these students up and fostering a sense of a welcoming community, the writing center could potentially encourage them to strive for better achievements (ones they necessarily wouldn't go after if not given the drive or motivation to succeed). Furthermore, tutors become a means toward connecting students to other campus resources they normally wouldn't look into—meaning they could become more involved on campus both academically and socially. By being in relatively the same age range, tutors act as a role model of sort to the students and help to broaden the already expansive knowledge the students have already been given (from the university itself) by breaking it down in simple terms and helping each student engage and fully understand the aspects they are struggling with. Writing centers and those who support them must devote more energy to supporting first-generation students: from identifying what factors lead to their success (and, by extension, to degree completion) to considering what barriers exist for that specific student population. By doing so, writing centers would become a more effective institution, offering better writing center services and practices geared toward first-generation students.

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