

Addressing the Needs of First-Generation College Students: Lessons Learned From Adults From Low-Education Families

Melinda M. Gibbons and Marianne Woodside

The fact that 1st-generation college students have lower retention rates than their peers and confront barriers hindering college success is well known. However, less information exists about the effect that 1st-generation college status has after college completion. In this qualitative study, the career development experiences of adults from families without college education were examined. Three themes were identified: the role of the father, expectations about career, and expectations about college. Implications for college counselors are provided.

Keywords: first-generation, career development

College attendance and retention are important topics in education. First-generation college students, a group identified as struggling with both of these issues (Ishitani, 2003), account for about one quarter of traditional-aged college attendees (Horn & Nunez, 2000), tend to be from lower income households (Horn & Nunez, 2000), and are more likely to represent an ethnic minority (Bui, 2002) than their peers. With the increase in students entering college (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009) and colleges' push to increase retention and graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2009), understanding the needs of first-generation college students is more important than ever.

Although plentiful research exists on this population, much of the data comes from currently enrolled college students. Less is known about the effect that first-generation college status has after college completion. Through this study, we sought to add to the literature by interviewing adults whose parents lack postsecondary education about their career and work experiences and the influence of family on those experiences. In particular, we wanted to know about differences and similarities by gender, as well as general themes related to being a first-generation student.

First-Generation College Students

First-generation college students, defined as those whose parents lack postsecondary education or training, often attend college to honor the family or

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to pursue future financial success (Bui, 2002). These students often rate themselves lower academically (Gibbons, Borders, Wiles, Stephan, & Davis, 2006), perceive more barriers to going to college (Gibbons & Borders, 2010), and have less math and science experience (Horn & Nunez, 2000) than their peers.

Once they arrive at college, further differences can be observed as well. First-generation college students are more likely to need remedial course work (Warburton, Bugarin, Nunez, & Carroll, 2001), attend college part time (Warburton et al., 2001), feel less prepared for college (Reid & Moore, 2008), and earn lower grades (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). These factors are associated with their higher levels of college attrition.

An examination of the reasons behind these differences exists in the literature. For example, Barry, Hudley, Kelly, and Cho (2009) examined the idea of college as a stressful life event for first-generation college students and found that first-generation students were less likely to disclose and discuss feelings of stress than their peers. Because discussion of feelings is cited as a stress reducer, nondisclosing students would be more likely to experience higher stress levels. Relatedly, Collier and Morgan (2008) conducted focus groups to explore first-generation college students' understanding of faculty expectations and found that they experienced problems with faculties' use of jargon and high-level vocabulary, and also had problems with time management, which led to problems in class and with assignments. Finally, Orbe (2004) discovered that first-generation students often did not see themselves as unique or different from their peers. The lack of a collective group mentality, within the college context, led to less social support for first-generation students. These researchers all suggested the need for social support for first-generation college students.

Other researchers attempted to examine strengths in first-generation college students. Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) learned that first-generation students identified peer support as necessary for college success, whereas Gofen (2009) and McCarron and Inkelas (2006) noted that family support influenced college attendance and success. Other researchers (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Neumeister & Rinker, 2006; Reid & Moore, 2008) found that mentoring during college was vital to college success. Successful first-generation college students included those who were gifted (Neumeister & Rinker, 2006), wanted to attend graduate school (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005), and were motivated to attend college based on personal interest or intellectual curiosity (Dennis et al., 2005). In all studies, however, it appears that some type of social support is necessary for first-generation students to be successful in college.

Family Influence on Work and Career

The influence of family on career development is well established, extending from childhood through adolescence (see Whiston & Keller, 2004). Otto (2000) noted that parental beliefs, particularly those of mothers, influenced the career-related values and beliefs of adolescents. In their qualitative study,

Schultheiss, Kress, Manzi, and Glasscock (2001) found that family support, in general and related to career, influenced career development. Family members, as role models, affected career planning as well. Germeijs and Verschueren (2009) also noted the importance of mothers' support in adolescents' career development, finding that a secure relationship with the mother also predicted more in-depth career exploration. Similarly, Gushue and Whitson (2006) linked parental support to higher career decision self-efficacy and outcome beliefs in adolescents, suggesting that positive support helps them overcome perceived barriers.

Additionally, family background variables such as parent education level, career attainment, and socioeconomic status of the family also appear to directly affect career expectations and outcomes, although this research is more fragmented (Whiston & Keller, 2004). Schoon, Martin, and Ross (2007) found that parent socioeconomic class and parent expectations about educational attainment directly affected male children's later career paths. Wiesner, Vondracek, Capaldi, and Porfeli (2003) linked current employment difficulties with previous family-of-origin distress during adolescence. Relatedly, Porfeli, Wang, and Hartung (2008) found that children's structured perceptions about work were based partly on parents' work experiences and feelings about work. Finally, Marks (2008) found family of origin to have a direct influence on career development.

To add to the literature on parental influence and first-generation college students, our qualitative study focused on career and educational issues facing people whose parents lack postsecondary education. Specifically, we wanted to know more about the career and work experiences of our male and female participants and the influence of family on those experiences.

Method

Our study is based on previous qualitative analyses of findings from two phenomenological studies we conducted that examined the career and work experiences of women, and then subsequently of men whose parents have no education beyond high school, and the influences of family on these experiences (Gibbons, Woodside, Hannon, Sweeney & Davison, 2011; Woodside, Gibbons, Davison, Hannon, & Sweeney, 2012). We sought to compare the results of the two studies and articulate common themes and differentiating nuances of these experiences and influences, especially as they relate to the college experience. Because the initial studies of the women's and men's experiences provide the foundation for the current analysis, we briefly describe the participants and summarize the procedures, method of analysis, and findings.

Foundational Studies

Participants. Our purposeful sample (Merriam, 2009) of 17 participants (11 women and six men) whose parents had no education beyond high school

was from one southeastern state. Prospective participants read flyers posted on campus and in the community and contacted the primary researcher. Of the women, two participants completed high school only; one had some college but no degree; one was currently an undergraduate student; and seven graduated from college, with one holding a master's and education specialist degree, one holding a master's and working on her PhD, and one holding a PhD. Demographically, the women's ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s; 10 were Caucasian and one was African American. Their work experience varied from being a college student ($n = 2$), coordinating departments as an administrative assistant ($n = 3$), working for nonprofit agencies ($n = 2$), working as an educator ($n = 3$), and assuming responsibilities as a stay-at-home mother ($n = 1$). For the male participants, one had a master's degree, three had earned bachelor's degrees, one earned a high school diploma and a welding certificate, and one did not graduate from high school. Their ages ranged from late 30s to early 60s; four were Caucasian and two were African American. The men worked in maintenance for large organizations ($n = 2$, one as supervisor), in a home repair business as an owner ($n = 1$), in sales ($n = 1$), in television as a writer/producer ($n = 1$), and in education teaching science ($n = 1$). We gave each participant completing the study a \$15 gift certificate. The human subjects review board approved both studies.

Procedure. The procedures for the first and second studies followed Creswell's (2006) recommendations for conducting a phenomenological study. We used Sharf's (2010) definition of *work* as a "purposeful activity to earn money or other reward and possibly to produce a product or service to others," whereas the term *career* describes the "roles individuals play over their lifetime" (p. 3). The terms *career* and *work*, however, were used interchangeably in the interviews, allowing the participants to create their own definitions or understandings. We considered both the experiences of work and career and the influence of family on those experiences as a single phenomenon.

Before beginning the data collection process, we discussed our beliefs that led to an interest in the research. This discussion helped us identify potential biases that may have affected our perspectives on the research. A bracketing activity provided information about researcher biases (Merriam, 2009). We interviewed each other on career development and the influences of family. We then shared our interviews with each other, developed themes from the interviews, and discussed our findings. Results from this interview, analysis, and discussion follow. First-generation career exploration and development as it relates to college students is a long-term research interest of the first author. She is interested in how the lived experiences of first-generation adults can support the work of college career counselors. Themes from her personal career experiences include a strong work ethic and parental support. The second author comes to this topic primarily from an interest in phenomenological inquiry as a way to more deeply understand the experiences of others. She is also interested in how this information relates to psychological principles and to counseling others and is committed to understanding those with less

access to educational opportunities. The career development experiences of the second author reflect the themes of working hard, fear of failure, and the importance of education. During each step in the data analysis, we reviewed our own biases and the relationship these biases had to the findings. Furthermore, we used our independent analyses to check our biases and provided participant words to illustrate the findings.

Trained doctoral students contacted interested participants, discussed the informed consent, arranged a meeting place, and interviewed the participants. Each interview began with the following question: “Tell me about your career and work experience. How did you get to where you are now?” Using encouragers such as “tell me more” and “give me an example of that,” interviewers then asked the participants to tell them about the influence their family has had on their career and work experience.

Data analysis. The first of five steps in the data analysis was the bracketing interview that helped to acknowledge and negate the effects of researcher bias (Creswell, 2006). Second, we established meaning units, or the focus of a given part of the conversation, while reading the transcripts aloud together, marking when the focus shifted. Third, after reading each transcript individually and noting possible meanings and themes, we summarized the experience of each participant. Then, meeting together, we shared individual analyses, summaries, and negotiated group meaning. After seven rounds of independent analysis and group negotiation, we created themes reflecting the core of participant experiences. Fourth, we asked participants for feedback on the themes. Finally, we stepped back from the minute details of the data and asked, “What does this information tell us about the meaning, perceptions, and understandings of the experience of work and career and the influence of family on the experience?” We examined the experiences of all of the participants, the differences between them, how themes related to each of the other participants’ experiences, and the overarching essence of participant experiences.

Findings. For the women, one essence, *perseverance*, and five themes, *being a daughter/woman*, *support and encouragement*, *what matters*, *why I chose*, and *limits and options*, shaped their career and work experiences (see Gibbons et al., 2011). One essence, *mottos from father*, and five themes, *what work is like*, *preparation/education*, *who or what influenced*, *how to be at work*, and *challenges/opportunities/choices*, described the meaning of work and career and family influence on the men’s experience (Woodside et al., 2012).

Current Study

As indicated earlier, the two foundation studies focused on the experiences of the women and men separately. These analyses allowed us to provide in-depth descriptions of work and career and family influences. Creswell (2009) suggested conducting sequential studies to provide varying perspectives on the same or similar research topics to expand the knowledge base. In the current

study, we completed basic qualitative research (Merriam, 2009) to compare and contrast the women's and men's experiences of work and career related to their college experiences and the influence of family on those experiences. Because findings in a phenomenological study represent interpretation of the data, qualitative researchers encourage reexamination of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) to reveal new insights and nuances of the phenomena studied. The methodology in this study adapts a research method used in business and marketing (Urbick, 2011) by reanalyzing data from two similar studies. Wiles, Crow, and Pain (2011) termed this research approach as *qualitative adaptation*. Using this method allowed us to explore common themes for the women and men and detail the nuances of differences within the themes. The same 17 participants described earlier were included in this study. Assuming a phenomenological stance (Creswell, 2009), we based our analysis on the meaning of interviewee experiences.

Data analysis. We began our data analysis by bracketing our understanding of the research topic by discussing how the previous two research studies influenced our understanding of the differences of women's and men's career and work experiences and the influence of family. Next, independently, for both the women and men, we pulled the themes and essences and their descriptions from our original analyses. We each made notes about similarities and differences among the themes, subthemes, and essences. We met to discuss our analysis and created a list of questions about our interpretations. Independently, we reread all of the original interviews, making notes about the list of similarities and differences and finding quotes that confirmed or refuted them. We then created a new list of understandings of similarities and differences between the women and men. We were careful not to reanalyze the initial themes; rather, we studied the nuances of the experiences. We continued meeting to negotiate a set of salient issues that both the women and men described. We then combined these issues into three themes: the role of the father, expectations about career, and expectations about college.

We chose the three themes we believed would (a) represent the majority of the participants, (b) enhance the literature on first-generation college students, and (c) suggest concrete implications for college and career counseling. Throughout this process, we returned to the transcripts and chose quotes to illustrate these three themes. We also recorded how many participants described each of the salient themes. We came together again to discuss our descriptions and the similarities, differences, and nuances we found.

Findings

Use of thick research description, multiple interviews, bracketing interviews, and independent and collaborative data analysis suggests a trustworthiness of the data. Ultimately, the reader must decide if the participant experiences and data analysis contain a possible representation of the reality of experience. Inherent in the work is our interpretation of the participant experience. We

describe three common themes of the experience of career and work and the influence of family for the women and men interviewed.

Role of the Father

For our participants, fathers played a unique and important role in their educational and career experiences. We noticed this in our initial analysis of the men, but upon analysis for this study, we found fathers were salient for the women as well. Of the 17 participants, five of the men and eight of the women specifically mentioned their fathers as being more influential than their mothers. The sixth man grew up without a father and instead cited his older brother as a primary influence, whereas the women spoke about both parents as a single unit.

For many of these participants, their fathers were viewed as the main financial providers for the family, regardless of whether the mother worked outside the home. The messages received about work from the fathers were particularly important for these participants. One female participant noted, "I didn't want to work in a job that I was gonna be treated like crap for the rest of my life [like her father had in his job]," whereas a male participant noted, "And that's what daddy taught me, see although he went [only] to the third grade . . . he believed in doing even if you digging a ditch or whatever you do the best you can." One female participant summed it up by saying, "Probably my dad more than my mom . . . my mom . . . she was a stay-at-home mom so . . . y'know."

Sometimes the messages the participants received from their fathers were about work in general, as one male participant said that through his father he learned that it is important to "kind of find your bliss you know; just you know, you got to work but don't do something that you are going to be miserable at just so you can draw a paycheck." A second male participant received a similar message from his father about choosing a college major: "Just make yourself happy; don't be miserable throughout your life." One female participant recalled rebelling against the message from her father: "And you don't just try and fail. It wasn't okay with him; he was a little bit more success driven and um there was always a goal. . . . Goals are important to me but um they are not um deal breakers in my life."

Other times, participants described more subtle messages. One male participant noted his father's work personality. "My father was self-employed for years, big-time entrepreneur, he was very successful at it. . . . Sometimes he would jump too quick into something; still does at 86 years old and we rein him in, but I think I made the conservative stuff and I tend over the plans at times from that influence." Whether overt or subtle, in all cases, the father's job led to a message received about work.

Some participants indicated that their fathers had certain expectations about college-going. Some fathers had different educational ideas for their sons and daughters, with sons expected to attend college and daughters given a different message. One female participant noted, "The boys were pushed to go to college; the girls were not. . . . Now working, we were expected, as

soon as you turned 18, you got out of school, you go to work, and the boys go to school, and that's pretty much the way it was." Alternatively, some fathers believed that college was not necessary for anyone. A male participant recounted his father's response to his desire to return to college after a long absence. He said his father replied, "Not everybody needs a college education to succeed in business or in life." A female participant noted, "Nobody ever said, 'Oh yeah, you should go to college' because I think it was a money thing. There just never was money for it. . . . Nobody talked to me in high school that much either about scholarships and all." These messages from the father resonated for the participants, with some continuing their education despite the message and others choosing to follow the recommendation and go straight into the workforce.

In other families, the message to attend college was clear and came specifically from the fathers. A female participant noted, "My [father] always expected that I would go to college, um, was never even remotely questionable . . . and I was the only one of their children who was put in that position." She also touched upon her father's expectations of her while in college, saying that when she got to college "and became a language major, my father really hated it. He wanted me to be an engineer." Another female participant described her military father, who set strict rules in the house:

I was expected to do what it took to get to a university and to graduate. You know, it was never a doubt, never at all. I wasn't told what to major in or what to do; I don't think that being a teacher was okay and wasn't necessarily better or worse than anything else but it was just I was gonna get a college education and from that point, you know, this is where I am. Ended up teaching.

In these cases, participants followed their father's wishes and attended college, although some fathers were not happy with their choices.

Expectations About Career

The 17 participants made numerous comments about their career expectations. Some of these are detailed in the previous section about the influence of the father, but participants also had their own views about career. Twelve of the participants (three men and nine women) specifically mentioned the importance of enjoying one's career. Some discussed the idea that work needs to be about more than just money. For example, one male participant explained, "My profession is something that I love to do. I look forward to going to work and two thirds of the battle is enjoying what you do; if you don't enjoy it, the job is miserable regardless of the pay." A female participant also described the contradiction between pay and money, saying, "And I took a big pay cut to get this job, but it's like, I don't care; y'know, I need the money, but it's like you get to the point where you, it's more important to be happy to go to your job."

Others discussed doing what they enjoy as part of their view on career choice in general. For example, three participants described feeling as though they

were meant for a specific job. One female participant said, “I truly believe I was born to teach; I truly believe that . . . and I think I am right where I am supposed to be.” In discussing her work, another female participant said, “I find [work] really, really rewarding, engaging. . . . I’m a social person, so for me it has always been about the relationship[s] that I have.” A third woman, discussing her enjoyment of her job, commented, “Every day, no matter what happens at work during the day, I leave here knowing that I did something good. Something that was of benefit to society.” The good feelings she described led to feelings of self-worth.

Another theme that emerged from participants was their belief in working hard. Eight participants, five men and three women, mentioned the importance of displaying a good work ethic, regardless of job enjoyment. One participant linked work ethic with promotions, saying, “I’m not a stump. I’m not just wanting to stay put. . . . It’s a matter of loyalty with my company and, y’know, bide my time but it’s certainly, uh, I think that door will open up.” Another described working hard as something you do “when you try to do the best and that you know then that makes the difference.” A third participant mentioned feeling proud of how others viewed him, stating, “It means a whole lot that [they] can trust me that way.” A female participant summed up the belief in a strong work ethic by saying, “I’ve worked hard, and I’ve put everything I’ve got into it what I do.” For these participants, working hard and demonstrating a strong work ethic was particularly relevant to expectations about career.

Finally, some participants noted their belief that education leads to a good job. One lamented his lack of education, saying, “You can do a good job and people like you, but if you can’t read and write to do things you know so you don’t, you don’t go far.” Similarly, a female participant stated, “I don’t think I’d be where I am now if I had gone on to college.” Others commented on how college helped prepare them for a career. “I’m well educated enough and experienced enough that I can find someone who will give me the opportunity,” one male participant said. Another stated, “[I] just know that I have a future doing something . . . [with an] advanced degree.” Overall, expectations about career included enjoying what you do, demonstrating a strong work ethic, and connecting education with future work.

Expectations About College

Four of the men and eight of the women earned college degrees; one additional woman started college but withdrew without a degree. These participants had varying views about the college experience and their expectations about earning a college degree. The men and women differed in their views about college, but most agreed that they attended college to follow the requirements set forth by their parents or to increase their chances of career success. In all cases, college was seen as a milestone for these participants, although graduating from college often did not lead to the financial reward and success they

anticipated. Nevertheless, all seemed proud of the fact that they had earned a college degree; all mentioned their college education status in their opening statement of the interview, even though the question was “Tell me about your career and work experiences. How did you get to where you are now?”

Several of the women discussed the importance of mentorship related to college success. One noted, “I loved my math professors. . . . They weren’t there just to do a job; they really cared about us and wanted us to do well. We did a lot of independent projects, working one-on-one with them, lots of encouragement.” Another stated, “I was getting lots of encouragement . . . very aggressive encouragement, put it that way, from my professors in graduate school who really felt I should go on.” A third female participant also noted that she “had a really great mentor” who pushed her to earn an advanced degree. For these women, their college mentors helped motivate them throughout their schooling and, in two cases, pushed them to continue their education.

All of the men and three of the women specifically linked going to college with future career success. Some found this perceived link to be accurate, whereas others reported that the college degree did not help them in their current career field. One male participant noted, “I graduated with a 3.74 average and I was president of the Honor Society. . . . That doesn’t mean anything on a résumé, let me tell you, it means squat; the 3.74 didn’t help a lot either.” Another man noted that he enjoyed school but remarked, “Now I look at it and I’m like, well, did I really need school for where I’m at now?” Alternatively, a third man described his rationale for returning to school for a master’s degree:

I knew that I wanted to work with science, work with people and freedom. Where can I fit those three things together? I think that things worked out well for me now. Teaching science. I got my education and am teaching now.

A female participant described a more general experience, saying, “I keep thinking, jeez, I really want to further my family and get, y’know, actually get an education and influence others in my family to get an education.”

Finally, two participants described wanting a college degree because of their love of learning. One woman stated, “The only thing I ever wanted at a very, very young age was to go to college. But it’s only, it had nothing to do with career or finding this great big job.” Likewise, a male participant said, “I had a drive to finish my master’s in environmental biology; that was something that I wanted to do for myself. I told myself I would get myself a master’s.”

Discussion and Implications

This study identified work and career issues facing women and men whose parents lack postsecondary education and also described the influence of the family of origin on work and career. In this section, we examine the findings within the context of relevant career development literature and suggest implications for college career counselors and advisers. We suggest several

new insights regarding career development and the influence of the family. First, the parental influence—particularly the role of the father—provides an important insight into the unique paternal sway for both the women and men in our study. Whether participants accepted the father’s modeling, mentoring, or advice, or challenged it, the father’s role was significant in career development. Second, participants in our study emphasized that they wanted to enjoy their work; they did not make choices based solely on financial success. Relatedly, they continually pointed to their work ethic as a core value. Last are the issues related to college-going. The participants all viewed college as a means to a good job, but differed on the role of mentoring during the college years; mentoring was salient for woman and less so for men. Several women indicated that mentors “made the difference” for them, their options, and their successes. A detailed discussion related to the themes follows.

Paternal Influence

The family is an important context in which vocational development occurs (Watson & McMahan, 2005; Whiston & Keller, 2004), and, for most career theorists (see Sharf, 2010), parents are believed to influence career development. Our findings affirmed the influence of parents on career and work for those with parents with no formal education beyond high school. More unique to our study, however, was that both women and men specifically described the influence of the father. This result differs from some studies that note the importance of the mother’s influence on career development (e.g., Germeijs & Verschueren, 2009; Otto, 2000). We hypothesize that parent education level may be linked to this strong paternal influence level. In other words, perhaps fathers more directly influence students from low-education backgrounds in terms of career development than do mothers. In our study, fathers provided direction, including (a) qualities one should display at work (hard work, honesty), (b) decisions related to college (college or no college, specific major), (c) why one should work (to support your family, financial independence), and (d) what to find in work (bliss, being happy, making money, securing your future). Some participants followed the father’s advice; others challenged it. All were aware of the advice, but not necessarily aware of the strength of influence.

Since these participants described their experiences in retrospect, the influence of fathers was salient and clear. For students in college, however, this awareness may be less apparent. College career counselors and advisers can build on paternal influence by helping first-generation college students become aware of the possibility of the strong influence of their fathers. In particular, counselors might help students describe the influence of their fathers on their career development. By asking about this directly, counselors might help these students better understand this influence and its role on their current career decisions. For example, counselors could ask clients to discuss the lessons learned from their fathers about why to work, what to major in, or what to look for in a career. In addition, counselors could help clients process any

dissonant feelings related to internal conflicts about what their fathers have suggested. Students who disagree with their fathers may feel guilty or confused, and this may interfere with career decision making.

Career Expectations

The participants articulated their expectations for their careers, or what work and career meant to them. They talked about choosing work they enjoy; the choices were often linked to their values and were not only about the money they made or would make. Previous findings related to gender indicated that men tend to embrace values such as succeeding financially and gaining status and prestige, whereas women desire work in the helping fields (Duffy & Sedlacek, 2007). In our study, the men's and women's responses did not reflect the findings within the literature. Both men and women described wanting to enjoy their work and not working just for financial success.

The participants in our study described the importance of enjoying their career, the importance of working hard at their jobs, and their belief that education led to a financially lucrative and secure job. These findings are supported by Meriac, Poling, and Woehr (2009), who found no gender differences in work ethic beliefs. Meriac et al. did not include data about parent education level or socioeconomic level, but on the basis of our participants, it appears that both men and women from families without college experience display strong work values.

The work values expressed by these participants relate to the concept of work ethic. Miller, Woehr, and Hudspeth (2002) defined *work ethic* as a "commitment to the value and importance of hard work" (p. 452). They suggested the construct was the result of multiple dimensions, including the importance of work, independence in work, belief in the value of hard work, and beliefs about a moral world. These dimensions, particularly beliefs in the importance of work and the value of hard work, are evident in the beliefs of our participants. The participants noted that it was important for others to see them working hard, but they also worked hard for themselves as a source of personal pride. They stated that working hard to achieve academically should help in attaining a good, lucrative career.

Counselors might help students by having them articulate their values and career goals and distinguish between those that are their own and those developed through fatherly influence. Using a values card sort can help clients with this process. This type of assessment uses a set of cards with career-related values on them, and asks the client to separate them into piles from very important to not important related to career. Counselors can watch how their clients make decisions based on their sorting style, and then discuss with their clients the process and the choices made. It is worth keeping in mind that our participants valued hard work, financial security, pride in accomplishments, and recognition for accomplishments.

College Expectations

For many of the participants, the experience of work and career included expectations about college and the outcomes of attending and graduating from college. We noted that by definition of their parents' level of education, these participants were first-generation college students. All of the college-attending women and men linked college to job and career and to future success. Recent studies reflect that current college students expect that preparing for a job through education will increase their opportunities for financial success (Berger, 2004). For our participants, going to college did not ensure future success or jobs related to their areas of study. Murphy, Blustein, Bohlig, and Platt (2010) indicated that current college graduates experience pressure in dealing with a changing workplace that demands adaptability and flexibility. The participants in this study reflected this need to adapt.

One difference between the women and men in our study was the influence of mentoring. For all of the college-attending women, mentors played a significant role in their success; the men did not talk about mentoring. The importance of mentors for students has been confirmed by previous research (Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008). The mentors, as described by the female participants, supported their college efforts by encouraging their academic work, providing them with professional opportunities, finding financial support, and pushing them to continue their education. Finally, two of the participants linked their love of learning to what they valued from college and included self-improvement (Zysberg & Zisberg, 2008).

College counselors might emphasize the pride that first-generation college students take in graduating, and use this as a platform for college retention. Also, they might discuss the possible disconnect between a college degree and future financial success; that is, counselors can help these students face the possibility that a degree might not lead to a lucrative, secure job, especially in today's economy. Then, counselors can help these students consider other reasons for completing their degree, such as increased job options, personal pride, and increased possibility of a job with benefits.

Counselors can also focus on the importance of mentorship for female first-generation college students. The participants highlighted these relationships, especially related to college completion and graduate school attendance. Counselors might link students with potential mentors or discuss ways that students can find mentors on their own, such as through volunteering for research projects or meeting with faculty during office hours. Because these students might not recognize the importance of mentors, counselors can directly discuss the topic during counseling.

Proactive Campus Activities

College counselors also can use the results of our study to proactively assist their students. Many colleges are experiencing a surge in the number of first-

generation college students (NCES, 2009), but they may not be changing their student outreach activities accordingly. As stated earlier, first-generation college students are more likely to commute to campus, attend college part time, and work at least 20 hours per week (Warburton et al., 2001). Therefore, they may miss announcements made through traditional means, such as flyers in dorm rooms or even online announcements that seem focused on full-time students.

Counselors might consider more targeted means of connecting with first-generation college students. Remembering that these students may not self-identify as first-generation (Orbe, 2004) is vital to the success of these proactive approaches. Activities must help first-generation students feel accepted on campus and understood by campus staff in order for these students to take advantage of the proposed opportunities. Examples include creating targeted electronic mailing lists for students who are first-generation, offering evening workshops introducing students to the unique needs they may have as first-generation students, and providing orientation activities specific to this group. During these activities, the themes identified from this study could be introduced as talking points; students may then reflect upon these ideas and determine if they are similar to their own experiences. In any case, first-generation college students can begin to learn about the opportunities available on their college campus.

In our study, we examined the qualitative interviews of men and women from low-education backgrounds for themes about career development and the influence of family on this development. Adults from families without college experience appear to have similarities in their career and college experiences, and these similarities can be used to better help these students during their college years. It is hoped that college counselors can take this information and apply it directly to their work with students, thereby increasing retention rates for first-generation college students.

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