**Support for First-Generation Students Through the College Admissions Process**

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The identity of “first-generation college student” can be defined in a variety of ways. Typically, a student is considered to be first-generation if “their biological parents did not complete a four-year degree (NASPA, 2017). Although officially defined as such for federal consideration including eligibility for Pell Grants, others define first-generation status to include those who have one parent with a degree and other close, in-home relatives such as older siblings with degrees. Regardless, research shows that first-generation students are at a disadvantage. “First-generation students enroll and graduate at lower rates than do other students” (Smith, 2015). High school bridge programs have shown to increase access to higher education for first-generation students by providing sufficient college preparation that the student might not otherwise receive elsewhere (Petty, 2014). The programs provide a support and knowledge network that have a major impact on a first-generation student’s chances of enrolling and persisting through college. The Early Identification Program (EIP) defines first-generation students as those who are first in their family to attend a college or university. The program has grown to accommodate more than 600 middle and high school students from across the Northern Virginia area. Summer Academy, specifically refers to the three weeks of required programming in the summer geared towards college preparation. This summer, for the first time ever, EIP had to offer their programming in a virtual capacity. First-generation students typically face both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that have an impact on their access to higher education and during a global health pandemic, in many ways, those factors are amplified. My practicum experience with EIP further emphasized my awareness of the need for equitable solutions, but also provided me insight as to how to best work indirectly with specific student populations. This was done through the creative use of technology and careful advising of staff. In addition, I did my best to encourage a culture of assessment that would produce useful information for EIP to make improvements for subsequent cohorts of students.

As a higher education professional, I find it necessary to align my work with my personal and professional values. Upon reflection of my own educational journey, I realized that the assumption has always been that I would somehow find ways to best advance myself according to societal expectations and standards of success. According to rankings, I have attended some of the best secondary and higher education institutions in the country. As an elementary school student, I tested into a ‘gifted and talented’ middle school program, which provided me the proper resources to successfully test into my high school, which undoubtedly put me in a considerable position to be admitted to one of the more selective universities in the country. In the United States, we often operate from an individualist mindset, meaning people are expected to advance socially and financially based solely on merit. Yet, those that possess the cultural capital often do not identify with marginalized groups such as first-generation students. Consequently, additional support is necessary to help remediate the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that these students face. This must be done while simultaneously recognizing that the experiences of students that identify similarly are still not homogenous. I personally believe a person’s identity does not warrant subjection to a set of disadvantages as a result of operating systems of oppression and privilege. I want students of all nontraditional identities including first-generation students to have access to college-going resources amongst others that promote social mobility. Truthfully, many students, including myself, receive additional support to help ease the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Many students receive college preparation whether its from a family member, school official, program, or other source. First-generation students often have less access to these forms of additional support, which highlights the need for targeted programs such as EIP. As I recognize that I had the privilege of access to additional support, I fundamentally resonate with the values, mission, and vision of EIP.

The practicum experience with EIP was a valuable opportunity to gain insight into the way in which the college admissions process is taught and relayed to middle and high school students. Often when I think of my own perceptions of the field prior to my current full-time position, I recall thinking of admissions personnel as superior, critical beings that were theoretically inaccessible. However, I have come to learn that admissions counselors and professionals overall serve as front-facing representatives of their institutions. What has remained consistent is the belief that a lot of the nuances of the college admissions process are not known by the general public. A college admissions process curriculum is not typically taught in your average United States public classroom. Students are not generally given explicit instructions as to how to get admitted to the schools of their choice. However, many students receive assistance elsewhere. Some pay for consulting services to receive tips and best practices for applying to some of the most selective institutions across the country. Thinking of intersectionality, students who are both first-generation and low-income are at a disadvantage because they do not have access to the information within their own network but often also do not have the resources to pay for support from elsewhere whether it is a private school or other form of academic service.

EIP attempts to remediate some of the disparities that first-generation students experience by providing consistent college preparation support for free. The program is completely run as an affiliate of George Mason University. This directly contributes to Mason’s values of inclusion and equity. Working with EIP I came to acknowledge the important and necessary relationship between the undergraduate Office of Admissions and EIP. A majority of the students that EIP works with apply to attend Mason. This provides the opportunity for Admissions to potentially yield, or matriculate, into the university. It is not the responsibility of Admissions to solely push students to apply to the institution. It is equally important to push students to attend the university after they are accepted. A mutually relationship between EIP and Admissions can serve to be beneficial between both parties. Through discussion with staff at EIP, I learned that specific staff members in Admissions, such as the Associate Director of Undergraduate Admissions who is also the director of the University Scholars Program, works closely with the program. The scholars program is a full tuition merit-based scholarship that is offered to a select group of incoming Mason students that are members of the Honors College. This upcoming fall, multiple students who have completed EIP are recipients of the scholarship. On a larger scale, however, EIP’s relationship with Admissions is arguably slacking. There should be more communication between the two stakeholders to simultaneously make the admissions process more seamless for EIP participants and increase the amount of students Mason yields from the program. A more intentional relationship between EIP and Admissions could ensure that the college and career readiness curriculum that EIP uses is relevant and at it’s best potential to be an optimal resource and valuable experience for EIP participants.

Overall, I believe the practicum experience with EIP has broadened my perspective on the college admissions process specifically from the lens of serving as a resource to first-generation students. It was apparent that Summer Academy was limited particularly this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Last minute, EIP staff was pushed to quickly pivot and adjust programming to best fit the new online modality. Consequently, a lot of energy and efforts were redirected to accustom this new focus. Moving forward, I hope to continue to serve as liaison to EIP through my full-time position as an admissions counselor. I would like to continue to learn from EIP’s staff, mission, and on-the-ground work. The commitment of providing increased access to college-going resources to first-generation students personally aligns with my own professional and personal values and I wish to continue my professional development in that regard.

**Resources**

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Smith, A.A. (2015, Nov. 10). Who’s in first (generation)?. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/11/10/who-are-first-generation-students-and-how-do-they-fare>