



Pathways to Flourishing for First- Generation College Students

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Center for the Advancement of
Well-Being

George Mason University

ABOUT:

- Virginia (Fairfax, Prince Williams, Arlington) & Mason Korea.
- Largest public university in Virginia and the Commonwealth region.
- 120 countries of origin
- R1 Extensive - 105 million in research.

STUDENTS:

- 35,000 Students (6,500 on Campus)
- 37% First-Generation (66% female, 34% male)



First-Generation College Students in Higher Education

DEFINING

First-Generation College Students are students where neither parent(s)/guardian(s):

- Completed a four year degree in the United States
- (NOTE: Some studies use the definition of First-Generation as having at least one parent/guardian who did not complete a four year degree in the United States)

HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

Many first-generation college students are:

- Economically disadvantaged
- More likely to be considered working-class
- Require additional academic (e.g., tutoring) and/or social support, and
- Experience a cultural gap and may not financial and family support

Well-Being & Civic Engagement

WELL-BEING

Building a life of vitality, purpose, resilience, and engagement

- Enriched by diversity and characterized by thriving across a range of domains, including physical, career, social, community, psychological and financial. Characterized as being satisfied with one's life and regularly experiencing curiosity, hope, meaning and joy.
- This definition was adapted from CWB at GMU [wellbeing.gmu.edu]

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

- The combination of civic knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make a difference.
- This definition was adapted from AAC&U [Ehrlich, T. (Ed.) (2000). *Civic responsibility and higher education*. New York: Oryx Press.]

Research Questions

Research Question 1

- To what extent does *participation in civic engagement activities (civic values, civic engagement, civic action) enhance the well-being (purposefulness, flourishing, self-realization) of first generation college students?*

Research Question 2

- To what extent does *participation in well-being focused activities enhance the well-being (purposefulness, flourishing, self-realization) of first generation college students as measured by the Gallup well-being student survey?*

Research Question 3

- *What differential pathways exist for first generation college students navigating campus and community involvement options? Which campus programs and interventions are most effectively promoting student flourishing and success for first generation college students?*

Methodology & Methods

QUANTITATIVE

- **Surveys:**
 - Existing Data - Gallup Well-Being Student Survey 2015
 - 22% of the 35,000 students completed the survey
 - n= 4,646; 35% first-generation college students
- **Method:**
 - ANOVA to examine group differences between FG and non-FG
 - Regression analyses to examine research questions (using FG sample only)

QUALITATIVE

- **Methodology: Narrative Inquiry**
- **Method:**
 - In-depth Interviews
 - Focus groups (FG and Non-FG)
- **Expert Nomination & Snowball Sampling (n=20)**

Enhancing Well-Being

Quantitative Findings:

- Positive interactions between well-being support and social well-being, and emotional support and social-well-being on Resilience. This means that **individuals who report experiencing greater well-being and emotional support at Mason AND greater personal social well-being, have greater Resilience.**
- A positive interaction between well-being support and school engagement on Physical well-being. This means that **individuals reporting high well-being support and school engagement, report greater Physical well-being.**

*The interactions suggest that **well-being resources** and **student engagement** complement each other to promote greater well-being in first generation students.*

Emerging Themes: Well-Being

Breakaway Guilt

“My parents will always love my sister and me but to be real, the college experience is a lot on a student ... I go to college and I am here early in the morning and late at night, there are days or a week that I do not see my parents and we live in the same house. Even though they will love me forever, sometimes, it is not there. It's my fault per se being a college student.” - AK

Emerging Themes: Well-Being

Family Dichotomy -- disconnect vs support

“I never went to my parents for support... It was always just me trying to fend for myself. So [working through things on my own] will stick with me for the rest of my life. I'd much rather me deal with my own problems than have someone else deal with my problems.” - James

“So I have never really had any advice, I can't relate to my dad or mom's advice because it's different. What they have been through is different than what I've been through. Times change, places change.” - LaBron

“...I would get advice [from my parents] when I was younger, and it really was the wrong advice thinking back to it. Now it's like I get why I thought differently than them, because I'm looking for different avenues that weren't presented to them in the first place.” - MK

Emerging Themes: Well-Being

Approaches to Flourishing

“Its like a bird in a cage, right? The bird is always in the cage. Flourishing to the people outside of the cage is like ‘oh wow, theyre still alive.’ Flourishing to me is like when the cage door is open and you get to decide what to do with your life” - MK

Effects of Civic Engagement

Quantitative Findings:

- **Student engagement variables showed positive, significant effects on all well-being outcomes**
- Volunteering and extracurricular/organizational involvement demonstrated positive, significant effects on all well-being outcomes except for financial well-being
- Individuals high on involvement and high on student engagement report **greater purpose**
- Individuals high on volunteering and high on school engagement report **greater physical well-being**

*Student engagement helps to augment the effects of civic activities on students' well-being outcomes. Alternatively, **having greater extracurricular/organization involvement helps to buffer against low hope or strengths.***

Emerging Themes: Civic Engagement

Classroom as catalyst for engagement

“I love that class....I love that he makes us go outside of class and talk to other people.... So even though I am not , like I said, coming to clubs and being able to meet just because of the time constraints, I am able to talk to other people and just like open up. So...I just feel like it’s so powerful...integrative studies is like so powerful, like it’s opening me up...”

“I’m talking to people [in class], and these people are telling me to go to these things and these things. So that’s so, if I can come to an event, then I will try to make it....if I can make the time for it. Pretty much class is what is getting me involved [in the community].”

-GM

Emerging Themes: Civic Engagement

Functional obligations as barriers to engagement

“I’m not involved in any groups [on campus] or anything because I just don’t have the time. But I do see that a lot of people try to reach out and stuff.

‘Come join. Come see this.’ So, I think that’s great because I know people love that. But me, due to time, I just can’t.”

“I would definitely [join on-campus organizations if I had extra time]. I know they have an undocumented group. I would totally do that.”

-Maria

Emerging Themes: Civic Engagement

Civic engagement as life-long commitment / obligation

“Just being part of the Mason community and its organizations. Doing something helping others, community service, philanthropy. Anything – I always liked helping others. That’s how I was raised.”

- LaBron

Comparative Study

QUANTITATIVE

- **Surveys:**
 - Existing Institutional Data – Student Strengths Inventory 2014
 - 80% of the 3,090 freshmen students completed the survey
 - n= 2,473; 33% first-generation first-year college student

These findings are **opposite** of the Gallup surveys where FG had higher resilience and lower student engagement.

It is important to **triangulate data from multiple sources and measures**, with representative samples, to fully understand the state of first-generation students' well-being. Using only this dataset would lead to an inaccurate conclusion about the resilience and engagement of first-generation students on campus.

FINDINGS

- **First-generation students reported**
 - Significantly lower resilience compared to non-FG
 - Significantly higher social well-being belonging and student engagement

Future Directions & Implications

Future Directions

- Collaborative auto-ethnographic project of research team
- Additional studies on:
 - social and economic capital of FG;
 - graduate FG students;
 - breakaway guilt;
 - transgenerational trauma and mental health

Implications for Practice

- Documentary about FG student stories
- FGS Scholarship for Doctoral Students
- FGRP (First-Generation Resource Portal)
- UNIV 100 sections for FG students
- Center for Well-Being and SAIL:
Mason's Office of Community Engagement

Conclusion

As our research shows, understanding the state of well-being for first-generation students is intimately tied to the population under study and instruments used to capture the cognitive and psychosocial domains of first-generation students' experiences on campus. *Without standard protocols on how to measure well-being, researchers and practitioners in higher education may inaccurately assume that first-generation students are resilient when they are not, or vice-versa.* Knowing their actual experiences is crucial to developing curricular and co-curricular innovations that attend to the needs, challenges, and strengths of first-generation students.