

## First Generation College Students: Are They at Greater Risk for Attrition Than Their Peers?

PHILLIP A. PRATT, ED.D.,<sup>1</sup> AND C. THOMAS SKAGGS, PH.D.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this study was to determine if first generation college students are at greater risk for attrition than their peers. Subjects of the study were 1,035 first-time, full-time freshmen (of whom 26.9% were first generation students) who were surveyed during their first week of classes in the Fall, 1988. The authors found that first generation students did not differ substantially from their peers in goal commitment or in their predispositions for academic or social integration. First generation students did report stronger institutional commitments. This study indicated that first generation college students in the sample were not at greater risk for attrition than their peers.

### INTRODUCTION

During the past three decades completion of post-secondary education has been viewed increasingly as important for individuals striving for upward socio-economic mobility. This has been particularly true in states which are geographically large and predominantly rural. Abundant financial aid for students, the proliferation of special programs to recruit for higher education, and the national emphasis on "access" offer ample testimony to the efforts made by federal and state government, and by many institutions themselves, in this area. Many of the individuals who attend college as a tactic to improve their social status may be characterized as "first generation" college students; those for whom neither parent had attended a post-secondary institution.

Researchers have reported differences in aspirations between first generation college students and their "continuing generation" counterparts. Blau and Duncan (1967) and Sewall and Hauser (1974) found strong relationships between parental education level and educational and occupational aspirations of high school students, including the desire to pursue college. Tseng (1971) reported a similar effect for socioeconomic status on the aspirations of high school seniors. Davies and Kandel (1981) found that parental influences on the educational plans of youth are stronger than peer influences (see also Smith, 1982; Looker and Pineo, 1983). Other researchers have reported that parents' educational level influence the educational attainments of youth and young adults. For example, Coleman (1976) found that family educational background exerted a strong influence on the educational attainment of low-income youth.

Although there exists a rich tradition of research investigating the relationships between parental educational levels and aspirations and attainments of youth,

very few studies have been conducted that specifically compare first and continuing generation college students in successful completion of a college education. The research reported by Billson and Terry (1982) is a notable exception. They reported that the 261 first generation students in their sample appeared to have greater vulnerability to attrition than their 255 continuing generation student counterparts. Their findings have been corroborated in recent studies with married women returning to college (Suitor, 1987) and with blacks (McCauley, 1988).

Billson and Terry (1982) used Tinto's (1975) framework of college student attrition to examine some of the differences observed between first and continuing generation students' vulnerability to attrition. Tinto proposed a multi-stage model to explain college students' decisions to drop out. Basically, various student background characteristics (including parental education and family SES) comprised the first stage of the model. Second, Tinto identified students' initial goal commitment (*i.e.*, the value placed on a college education) and institutional commitment as the second stage in the model. Third, the extent to which students are integrated socially and academically attenuates or enhances goal and institutional commitment; this phenomena comprised the stage in Tinto's model immediately preceding students' decisions to drop out from college. Tinto's model has proven to be a useful framework from which to understand college student attrition (1987).

The purpose of this study was to further compare first generation college students' and their peers' predispositions to leave college prior to graduation, using Tinto's model of college attrition as a framework for the investigation. Specifically, this study attempted to answer the question, are first generation college students at greater risk for attrition than continuing generation students?

<sup>1</sup>Office of Institutional Studies, University of Maine.

## METHOD

The subjects for this study were 1,035 first-time, full-time freshmen who completed the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP) Survey in September, 1988 at the University of Maine. The CIRP Survey involves an extensive array of items that detail new students' descriptions of their high school experiences and their perceptions, expectations, and aspirations for their college experiences. Five hundred twenty-four (50.6%) of the subjects were male and 511 (49.4%) were female.

Subjects were identified as "first generation" students if they reported that neither of their parents had attended at least "some college." This definition identified 278 first generation college students in the sample (26.9%) versus 757 (73.1%) continuing generation students.

Four of the constructs of Tinto's model were included in this study to determine the extent to which first generation students in the sample were more susceptible to attrition than continuing generation students. These four constructs were: goal commitment, institutional commitment, academic integration, and social integration. Additionally, subjects' indication of the importance placed on their enrolling in college by their parents was included in the comparisons of first and continuing generation college students. Chi square procedures were used in all data analyses except where noted.

*Goal commitment* was operationalized in this study by examining students' indication of the highest degree to which they aspired, the importance they placed on that aspiration, and how they rated themselves in achievement motivation (identified on the survey as "drive to achieve").

*Institutional commitment* was defined in this study by the number of schools other than the University of Maine to which they had applied and been admitted, the ranking of the University of Maine in their choice of college, and their confidence in having made the right choice in selecting the University of Maine. Additionally, each student's expectation for being satisfied with the University and the importance of completing the degree to which they aspired at the University were included as part of the operationalization of institutional commitment.

Their predisposition to *academic integration* was defined partially by their descriptions of various high school experiences (*i.e.*, the numbers of honors and advanced placement courses and the years of English, mathematics, science, etc., they took in high school). Additionally, self-ratings in general academic, mathematic, and writing ability areas were also included. Their indication of the importance of relationships with faculty both inside and outside of class was also included in this variable. Differences between first and continuing generation college students on their reasons for going to college (and for selecting the University of Maine) were also examined. Finally, students' feelings of preparedness for their University of Maine experience were also included.

Predisposition for *social integration* was defined by indicating the importance of participating in campus organizations and attending various athletic and cultural events. Subjects were also asked how many students they

knew well at the University and how many they expected or wanted to know well at the end of their first year. The difference between these was identified as a potentially useful index of need for social integration.

## RESULTS

Few differences were observed between first and continuing generation students in any predispositions to or needs for *academic integration*. No differences were found between these groups in the academic course work taken in high school (including incidence of honors and advanced placement courses). Additionally, no differences were observed between the self ratings of first and continuing generation students in academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, and mathematics ability. However, first generation students reported more doubt that they were adequately prepared for college (46.4%) than continuing generation students (39.3%) ( $X^2 = 3.79$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Finally, first and continuing generation students did not differ in the importance placed on relationships with faculty.

There were few differences observed between first and continuing generation students' predisposition to *social integration*, as well. No differences were observed between the groups in the importance they placed on participation in campus organizations, attendance at athletic or cultural events, or in joining fraternities or sororities. Similarly, no differences were observed in the importance they placed on fitting into the University. However, proportionately more first generation students reported little or no chance of actually joining a fraternity or sorority (57.8%) than their continuing generation counterparts (46.0%) ( $X^2 = 18.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Mean differences between the number of student subjects reported knowing at matriculation and the number they wanted or expected to know well by the end of the year for first and continuing generation students were not statistically significant (18.6 versus 21.0, respectively;  $t = -1.33$ ,  $p = .18$ ).

First and second generation students appeared not to differ markedly in their *goal commitment*. A higher proportion of first generation students in the sample limited their aspirations for higher education to an undergraduate degree than their continuing generation student counterparts. Forty-eight and a half percent of first generation students reported aspiring to a graduate degree compared to 60.6% of continuing generation students ( $X^2 = 8.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, no differences in the importance placed on these aspirations for higher education was observed between groups. Furthermore, first and continuing generation students' self-evaluations in their drive to achieve were not significantly different.

First and second generation students, however, did differ consistently in their *institutional commitment*. Proportionately more first generation students applied only to the University of Maine (31.8% versus 21.3%;  $X^2 = 11.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ). First generation students more often reported the University of Maine was their first choice than continuing generation students (63.5% versus

56.4%;  $X^2 = 4.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, first generation students reported themselves to be less likely to transfer to another school than did continuing generation students. Sixty-eight percent of first generation students compared to 57.9% of continuing generation students reported little or no chance of transferring ( $X^2 = 8.12$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

Finally, substantial differences were observed between first and continuing generation students in the importance placed on college attendance by their parents. Seventy-nine and four-tenths percent of the continuing generation students reported that their attending college was important to their parents compared to 64.5% of the first generation students ( $X^2 = 23.4$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

First generation students in this study appeared to be substantially more committed to attending the University of Maine than continuing generation students. On the other hand, college attendance appeared less important to the parents of first generation students than to the parents of continuing generation students.

Although first generation students reported greater concern about their preparation for college than their peers, no consistent differences between groups were observed in the area of academic integration. Moreover, while first generation students reported being less likely to join a fraternity or sorority than continuing generation students, no other differences between groups were found in the area of social integration. Finally, although first generation students were more likely to limit their educational aspirations to an undergraduate degree than other students, no other differences were observed between the groups with respect to goal commitment.

In contrast to the findings reported by Billson and Terry (1982), the results of this study suggest that first generation students are not at greater risk in leaving college prematurely than continuing generation students. In fact, to the extent to which institutional commitment plays an important role in students' decisions to drop out of college (*i.e.*, the stronger that commitment the less likely they are to do so), first generation students in this study would seem to be somewhat less likely than their peers to drop out of the University of Maine before graduation.

A possible explanation for this finding is that first generation students are very aware of the opportunity for socioeconomic mobility offered by their graduation from college. Their strong commitment to the University of Maine might reflect a singleness of purpose compared to continuing generation students' more diffuse reasons for college (and therefore a weaker commitment to a single institution). Additionally, since first generation students appear to experience less parental encouragement for their college enrollment than continuing generation students, their aspirations may be more internalized, and therefore more focused.

Clearly, the usefulness of these findings depends on two considerations. The first involves the method by

which Tinto's (1975) constructs (institutional and goal commitment, academic and social integration) were adequately operationalized. In fact, the data available from the CIRP survey for this study were fitted to the Tinto (1975) model after they were collected instead of being collected with the Tinto model specifically in mind.

A second consideration involves the usefulness of the Tinto model itself. That is, is the model sufficiently sensitive or relevant to differences that may exist in the susceptibility to dropping out of college of first and continuing generation students? A comparative validation of the Tinto model for first and continuing generation college students, as well as confirmation of the findings of this study by actual student dropout behavior, is necessary to address these two considerations. Such an investigation with the subjects examined in this study is planned.

## REFERENCES

1. Billson, J.M. & Terry, M.B. *In Search of the Silken Purse: Factors in Attrition Among First Generation Students*. Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Colleges, Denver, CO. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 214 431), 1982.
2. Blau, P. & Duncan, O.D. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York, NY: John Wiley, 1967.
3. Coleman, L. *Status Projections of Low-income Youth in the USA: Change Over Time and a Look to the Future*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 1976.
4. Davies, M. & Kandel, D.B. Parental and peer influences on adolescents' educational plans: some further evidence. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1981, 87 (2), 363-387.
5. Looker, D.E. & Pineo, P.C. Social-psychological variables and their relevance to the status attainment of teenagers. *American Journal of Sociology*. 1983, 88 (6), 1195-1219.
6. McCauley, D.P. Effects of specific factors on blacks' persistence at a predominantly white university. *Journal of College Student Personnel*. 1988, 29 (1), 48-51.
7. Sewall, W.H. & Hauser, R.M. *Education, Occupation, and Earnings: Achievement in the Early Career (Final Report, Grant #314: Department of Sociology, University of Wisconsin, Madison)*. Washington, DC: Social Services Administration, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1974.
8. Smith, T.E. The case for parental transmission of educational goals: the importance of accurate offspring perceptions. *Journal of Marriage and Family*. 1982, 44 (3), 661-674.
9. Sutor, J.J. Mother-daughter relations when married daughters return to school: effects of status similarity. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 1987, 49 (2), 435-444.

10. Tinto, V. Dropout from higher education: a theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*. 1975, 45 (1), 89-125.

11. Tinto, V. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

12. Tseng, M.S. Social class, occupational aspirations, and other variables. *The Journal of Experimental Education*. 1971, 39 (4), 88-92.