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# The main factors behind first generation college students' retention and dropout

Ahmed Hussein

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**THE MAIN FACTORS BEHIND FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE  
STUDENTS' RETENTION AND DROPOUT**

**by**

**Ahmed Hussein**

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Psychology  
College of Science and Mathematics  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
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Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

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## **Abstract**

Ahmed Hussein  
THE MAIN FACTORS BEHIND FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE  
STUDENTS' RETENTION AND DROPOUT  
2012/13

Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.  
Master of Arts in School Psychology

Research has shown that first-generation college students face many hurdles until they graduate if they did not drop out. Limited financial resources, lack of personal skills, and social supports cause many first-generation college students to struggle as they strive to achieve their academic aspirations and receive a degree. This study was developed to locate the main factors behind first-generation college students' retention and dropout. For the purpose of forming this study 84 college students were surveyed to collect data from college students themselves. The short-term study found that first-generation college students have more challenges finishing their studies and getting a degree, than having advantages to do so. The study offered some suggestions to what can be done to help this population of students. If these offered suggestions are adopted, it will help reduce first-generation college students' dropout. The study recommended further examination and research concerning first-generation college students' retention and dropout issues.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

This study tried to identify and locate the main factors behind retention and dropout of first-generation college students (those who are the first in their families to attend college or seek higher education). During the course of the study many first-generation college students face many hurdles. Differences in the income, Differences in the income, rdlles.attern cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders (Cushman, 2007). Their concern is often to make friends; which invites all the difficult identity issues of late adolescence. They are concerned about paying college fees and tuitions, are concerned about paying college fees and tuitions, ns It takes great self-esteem and determination for them to focus on their academic goals (Cushman, 2007).

These challenges which first-generation college students face can be summarized in several several llenges which first-generation college students face can be summarized in oalsike outsiders and dropout issues. are adopted, it will help r The report based on a survey of 9,000 students 9,000 students d on a survey of ions colleges, shows that students are likely to drop out if they: 1. do not feel they have been placed on the right course; 2. applied late to college; 3. find it difficult to make friends or receive negative views because of their culture; 4. have difficulty to get in at the start of their course; 5. are less satisfied that their course is interesting; 6. are less satisfied with the quality of teaching; 7. are less satisfied with their course timetable; 8. are less satisfied with help either to get a job or to go to university; 9. have difficult financial or family circumstances; 10. have their fees waived or reduced; and 11. are male (Anonymous. Education & Training, 1999).



## **Background**

First-generation college students have attracted a lot of interest from researchers over the last few years and higher institutions of learning have increasingly recognized the need to put measures in place to ensure that the retention rate of first-generation students improves (Snell 2008). In the context of this research paper, the term “First-Generation College Students” refers to those students in colleges whose parents did not attend or did not graduate from college. There is a general consensus among researchers that first-generation students drop out of college at a higher rate than non-first-generation college students or those students whose parents are also college graduates (Pike & Kuh, 2005). An examination of one-year retention between different students indicates non-first-generation students have a better retention rate than first-generation students (D'Allegro & Kerns, 2010). In addition, data from institutions of higher learning tends to support this observation and a number of possible causes for this problem have been suggested. Empirical research on this subject suggests that first-generation college students face more hardships in terms of expectations, financial support and so on as compared to non-first-generation college students.

## **Statement of the problem**

Educational researchers always have an interest in predicting the academic success and adjustment of college students generally, but the prediction of academic success for at-risk students is far more important (Dennis, Phinney & Chuateco, 2005). Many retention theorists and practitioners consider first-generation college students to be an at-risk population (Schultz, 2004). During their study time many first-generation college students face many hurdles such as: differences in the income, social styles, and even speech patterns; these cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders (Cushman, 2007); which most of the time force them to drop out of college.

## **Justification**

The high demand for skilled individuals over the past few decades has made it very urgent than ever to provide access to postsecondary education for all (Baum & Flores, 2011). For this reason, universities are becoming concerned with ways to increase retention rates, student success in college, and comfort level on campus for first-generation college students (Grant-Vallone, Reid, Umali & Pohlert, 2003). In all the U.S. educational institutions, administrators and faculty alike, have worried about and studied the first-generation college students' retention and dropout. They looked at specific academic, social, and financial challenges these students face and how best to ensure students' success. According to researches, first-generation college students are likely to face these challenges more than non-first generation college students do.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study tried to investigate and locate the main factors behind retention and dropout or the ill achievement of the first-generation college students. The study, also,

put suggestions to what can be done to avoid the negative factors that lead those students to drop out from college before they finish and earn a degree.

### **Hypothesis**

First-generation college students have more challenges finishing their studies and getting a degree, than having advantages to do so.

### **Assumptions**

The basic assumption of this study was that first-generation college students face more challenges than non-first-generation students do, and these challenges force them to struggle during their course of study or drop out completely from college without getting their degree. In general, many first-generation college students are more likely to face many hardships such as differences in the income, social styles, social styles, e income, ause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders (Cushman, 2007). They are concerned about paying college fees and tuitions, They are concerned about paying college fees and tuitio Another concern for them is often to make friends; which causes all the difficult identity issues of late adolescence. It takes great self-esteem and determination for them to focus on their academic goals.

## **Definition of Terms**

First-Generation college students: Students who are the first in their families to attend college or seek higher education (D'Allegro & Kerns, 2010).

Student Dropout: The term student dropout is taken to include students who inform the institutions that they no longer wish to continue studying; students who are prevented from continuing studies by the institutions because of failure to satisfy regulations, such as not meeting standards of progression; or students who disappear without a notice to the institutions (Roberts, 1984).

School Retention: Keeping students in higher education classes until they finish and receive their degrees (Hagedorn, 2006).

## **Summary**

Because of the importance of higher education for the society and the families, education for the society and the families, ation for the society and the and ill achievement between first-generation college students. The purpose of this research was to locate the factors that affect first-generation college students negatively, which might lead them to perform poorly or even drop out from college. During the course of study many first-generation college students face many hurdles. (Cushman, 2007) suggests that differences in the income, social styles, social styles, e income, cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders. Their concern is often to make friends; which invites all the difficult identity issues of late adolescence. They are concerned about paying college fees and tuitions, They are concerned aelves and sometimes their families. All these negative factors affect their self-esteem and determination to focus on their academic goals. For the purpose of validating this study a survey questionnaire was

conducted through the Rowan University pool. Potential participants for this survey were required to complete a survey and answer some questions about themselves and their experiences with higher education.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

This chapter presents a review of literature focusing on the factors behind first-generation college students' dropout rate, and the retention strategies aimed at first-generation college and university students. In order to identify gaps in literature related to the main factors behind first-generation college students' retention and dropout, this literature review focused the most on works published within the last 15 years. The literature review begins with an introduction that offers a broad view of first-generation students and the challenges they face as compared to their non-first-generation peers. This is followed by a detailed general benefits review as well as a cross-cultural analysis that dissects the cross-cultural issues related to first-generation students' retention and dropout. The literature review concludes with a summary of the salient issues raised in the literature.

#### **Introduction**

Education and higher education are vital to society's progress and the family wellbeing as well as for the family. Education secures three goals; education is a reliable index of achieving social mobility and family stability; it is a major tool which enables family to meet the responsibility placed on it by society; and education is a key medium for interaction of family and society ducation is a key70). Many families have realized that education is power and with education they will be able to shape their destiny (Lang & Ford, 1992)19 Arnett (2001) cited in (Sy & Romero, 2008) suggested that in the United States, entering college represents a major developmental transition. Because of

the importance of higher education for the society and the families, education for the society and the families, ociety and the famil, dropout, and ill achievement between first-generation college students. According to the U.S. According to the U.S. first-generation college students. families, their higher education at two-year institutions graduate within three years (Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). According to Johnson, and Rochkind (2009) there is a similar pattern in four-year institutions, institutions, pattern in four-year eive a degree within six years. These bleak statistics on national college completion rates are averages. In some institutions, In some institutions, tional col This is clearly a personal disappointment for the students and their families, but but is clearly a personal disappointment for the students and their families, ompetitiveness and a phenomenon that perpetuates economic insecurity and inequality (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Preliminary review of literature indicated that there are unique stressors that prevent first-generation college students from completing their post-secondary education. Lohfink and Paulsen, (2005) suggests that these stressors include false expectations, academic unpreparedness, lack of support and conflicting obligations.

Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) further reiterates that first generation students also have to deal with issues ranging from guilt and stress to contradictions in terms of how they relate to their families, peers and the community at large. The examples highlighted above are the unique intrapersonal dynamics that first-generation college students have to contend with in their academic journey. In order to understand the cross-cultural issues as well as the impact of the relevant cultural variables, it is important to examine the different dilemmas that first-generation college students face as they strive to achieve their academic aspirations. This section of the literature review examines the different

cross-cultural issues facing first-generation college students and puts into perspective the impact of the relevant cultural variables with main emphases on race, class and first-generation college students.

### **General benefits**

This research tried to locate the main factors behind retention, dropout and ill achievement of the first-generation college students. Findings will help colleges, and higher education institutions identify the needs of the first-generation college students and increase retention. The research findings will also help first-generation college students avoid and overcome the negative factors, and be able to finish their enrolment in higher education and earn a degree. Hundreds of thousands of students join colleges and universities every year (Perez & McDonough, 2008) and as much as there is no shortage of excitement and enthusiasm among freshman students embarking on their academic journeys, reality soon sets in and a substantial percentage of these students fall by the wayside (Bowers & Nunez, 2011). According to Ward, Siegel and Davenport (2012), the reasons as to why the rate of attrition among freshman students is so high have been a subject of academic interest for many years as colleges and universities seek ways of retaining students. However, while attrition of freshman students has been a general concern, it has been found that first-generation college students are more likely to drop out than their non-first generation peers (McKay & Estella, 2010). Researchers such as Bowers and Nunez (2011) and Murphy and Hicks (2006) have attributed this to the initial college experiences where students face a number of transition issues. Even as transition issues face all freshman students equally, it has been observed that non-first generation



students adjust better than first-generation students and this to some extent explains why retention rate for the former is higher (Torres, Reiser, LePeau, Davis & Ruder, 2006).

Researchers such as Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini (2004) and Cushman (2007) have termed the high dropout rate of first-generation college students a “disaster.” Considering that a large percentage of freshman college students are first-generation, the problem of attrition has widespread repercussions. To begin with, the high dropout rate prevents potential scholars from bringing in valuable knowledge to the global economy because they are unable to complete their education (Cushman, 2007). Williams and Butler (2010) observed that the primary reason why first-generation students drop out of college is their failure to overcome “a disproportionately large amount” of challenges. This suggests that the challenges that result in college attrition weigh more on first-generation college students as compared to their continuing-generation peers (Arbona & Nora, 2007). Alternatively, as Benmayor (2002) noted, it could also mean that continuing-generation students are always better prepared to cope with these challenges.

Gladieux and Swail (1998) assert that the level of access to higher education as well as the completion rate of minority students is often lower than for other students as cited in Williams and Butler, (2010). In the context of the US for example, the level of access and completion of higher education among African-American, Native-American and Hispanic students is lower when compared to that of White and Asian students. William and Butler (2010) cited Gladieux and Swail (1998) who suggests that the patterns of socioeconomic, gender and racial disadvantage further exacerbate the level of participation in higher education in terms of access and completion especially when it

comes to first-generation college students. This is attributed to the fact that the severity of different types of disadvantages tend to mirror those of race and gender. Gladieux and Swail (1998) assert empirical studies related to attrition and retention of first-generation college students often reflects socioeconomic, gender and racial disparities.

A review of different research papers published in the past decade indicates that when it comes to empirical studies related to first-generation college students, researchers tend to follow one of three broad themes. These themes are transition issues facing freshman students, the campus climate, and the academic preparedness of students (Williams & Butler (2010)). The majority of studies reviewed for the purposes of this research indicated that the major theme when it comes to first-generation college students is academic preparation. For example Choy (2001), established that the academic preparation of first-generation students attending four-year college courses is lower than that of non-first-generation students. This observation is consistent with research studies targeting potential first-generation college students when they are still in high school. According to Williams and Butler (2010), these students are less likely to take rigorous curriculums aimed at college preparation such as calculus, SAT or ACT examinations.

Jehangir (2009) suggests that for many low-income first-generation college students college is an unknown land at which they dream of arriving one distant day. Choy (2001) points out that the actions potential first-generation college students take prior to joining college have a direct impact on their preparedness and what eventually happens when they get to college is that the pressure overwhelms them primarily because they failed to take the four fundamental steps they should have taken to prepare for college. Williams and Butler (2010) reaffirms that college preparation is a four step

process that involves; (i) making a conscious decision that one intends to pursue a post-secondary qualification; (ii) academic preparation where one readies themselves to cope with college level work; (iii) taking SAT or ACT examinations if one intends to take a four-year course and (iv) gaining acceptance and fulfilling financial as well as making any other arrangements required to enroll. When it comes to first generation students, race, class and gender issues often get in the way and become an impediment in as far as the accomplishment of the four steps of college preparation is concerned (Williams & Butler, 2010).

The other prominent theme in research studies targeting first-generation college students is transitional issues and researchers generally agree that first-generation college students find it harder to transition to college life as compared to non-first-generation students (Folger, Carter & Chase (2004). According to Folger, Carter and Chase (2004), the transitional issues faced by first-generation college students could be addressed by the universities but in most cases, universities and colleges fail to put the necessary measures in place to address these issues; thus first-generation students are left at a disadvantage. A related study conducted by Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) found that White continuing-generation students tend to participate in college activities and are more involved in campus life as compared to their first-generation counterparts. Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin (1998) cited in Williams and Butler (2010) gives similarly interesting observations. According to their study, first-generation college students are more likely to enroll for remedial classes, enroll for two-year courses instead of four-year courses, work while in college and commute to college instead of living on campus.

According to Williams and Butler (2010), the rate of discontinuation of education among first year college students is higher among first-generation than among continuing-generation students. In addition to this, Folger, Carter and Chase (2004) points out that first-generation college student are faced with conflicting loyalties in relation to their families as well as their college and off-campus friends. Another observation put forward by Williams and Butler (2010) is that first-generation college students find it harder to reconcile their values and attitudes to the college culture as compared to their continuing-generation counterparts. These observations are closely related to the other core theme that comes out in first-generation college students related research studies. This theme is campus climate and its effect in regards to how first-generation college students interact with their peers, faculty and staff. Folger, Carter and Chase (2004) observed that continuing-generation students' perception in regards to faculty's concern about their success is more positive as compared to first-generation college students. Additionally, Lohfink and Paulsen (2005) point out that the levels of social and academic-integration among continuing-generation students is higher than that of first-generation college students.

### **Cross-cultural Analysis**

The literature of retention and developmental education for higher education is too extensive for a volume such as this (Adam & Gaither, 2005). Yet, the study tried to bring in sight as much material as possible about the main factors and challenges that the first-generation college students face. Many retention theorists and practitioners consider first-generation college students to be an at-risk population (Schultz, 2004). The educational, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds of some students who are first-

generation college students have not adequately prepared them for successful navigation through the academic cultural minefield of higher education (Smith, 2004).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, only 20 percent of young people who begin their higher education at two-year institutions graduate within three years ((Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The same rate is thought to be the in case of the four-year institutions; where about 4 in 10 students receive a degree within six years (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). These bleak statistics on national college completion rates are averages. These rates are a disappointment for the students, their families, and the society but increasingly, experts and leaders see it as a threat to U.S. international competitiveness and a phenomenon that perpetuates economic insecurity and inequality. In 2009, president Barack Obama set a goal for the United States to “have the highest measures that would ensure that an additional 5 million Americans would complete degrees and certificates in the next decade” (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

First-generation college students face numerous problems while advancing towards their degree such as ignorance of college cost and financial aid, their parents lack of information about college, being academically unprepared, and misunderstanding because of ignorance about the value of relationship-building (Schultz, 2004). However, it was shown that these factors do not operate in isolation. Students often compare the costs and the benefits of progress. They will withdraw if the scales tip towards the costs. Also, colleges are different and what will be an issue at one college may not be at another. The (“Education and Training”, 1999) research provides some evidence to challenge widely held beliefs that: drop-out is largely caused by the personal circumstances of students; initial student expectations of college are good indicators of

persistence or drop out; early withdrawal is strongly linked to the quality of college facilities and equipment; and students mainly leave college for work. Colleges and universities not only find it hard to expand enrollments and provide enrollment to diverse students, but also they find it difficult to recruit and retain first-generation college students (Lowery-Hart & Pacheco, 2011).

First-generation college students have less of a chance graduating due to the lack of family support, lack of finance, inadequate academic preparation, and many other barriers (Brooks-Terry, 1988). The programs which many institutions provide most of the time isolate first-generation students and create a protective group that does not fully melt inside campus culture. Although, education administrations try to increase retention of first-generation college students, students feel that those institutions do not meet their needs (Higbee, Lundell & Arendale, 2005; Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). Many of first-generation college students think that these programs create a separation between them and non-first-generation students, and they find it difficult to “fit in” (Wilson, Mason, & Ewing 1997).

According to Harvey (2002), in a study by the “American Council on Education”, there has been a steady increase in the percentage of non-white students admitted to colleges and universities. Also, this study reports that 59% of white students graduate within six years of enrolling in college, while the graduation rates are 38% for African American and Native American students and 46% for Hispanic students. The disproportionate gap in the graduation rates assures the need for the higher education community to rethink the strategies for improving the retention of students of color (Smith, 2004). Today’s diverse and financially burdened students enter the higher

education level intending to succeed at academic institutions that were mainly designed for culturally homogenous, middle-class populations. Students' dropout rates are so high that some conservative educators and politicians demand that higher education has to be saved by rooting out unqualified students (Kingston-Mann & Sieber, 2001).

Unlike in the past, many students today work and have families, and although they might receive financial aid of some sort, it's not enough to live on or to support a family. According to Lewin, (2009) cited in Johnson & Rochkind, (2009), complicating the problem, according to Jean Johnson, (2009) executive vice president of Public Agenda, is the fact that few working students receive any financial assistance from their families and those receive financial aid from the educational system find it insufficient. Interestingly, the Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research group, study noted (with a margin of error of plus or minus five percent, of first year college dropout students) that nearly six in ten did not receive any tuition assistance from parents. This is in contrast to the data, which showed that among students who graduated, more than six in ten received tuition assistance from parents (Lewin, 2009). Granted, some students drop out because they are too lazy to apply themselves, while others drop out because they really are not interested in obtaining a higher education and only enrolled to please their parents or because their friends were going to college. However, these students seem to be in the minority. According to a study conducted by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in 2009, the main reason students drop out of college is their need for money to survive (Lewin, 2009). Echoing the findings of the Gates Foundation, Public Agenda, a nonpartisan research group, released a 2009 report showing that "most dropouts leave college because they have trouble going to school while working to support themselves."

According to Johnson and Rochkind, (2009), a report, entitled "With their Whole Lives Ahead of Them" was based on a survey of more than 600 individuals aged 22 to 30 and compared those students who began college but did not graduate to those who earned a degree from either a two-year or four-year institution of higher education.

The high rate of attrition among first-generation students is a problem for them as well as for the institutions that they attend. The severity of this problem has been highlighted in a number of research studies that include Arum and Roska (2011) and McKay and Estella (2010) cited in McGrath (2011). McKay and Estella's study revealed that of every 100 first-generation college students who join universities, 43 of them leave without completing their studies. In comparison, only 20 out of every 100 continuing-generation students who join universities leave before completing their studies. The major cause of this huge difference between the dropout rates of first-generation and continuing-generation students according to McKay and Estella (2010) is financial. McKay and Estella (2010) study found that first-generation college students face difficulties in terms of financing their college education and this lack of financial ability is what finally drives most of them out of university before they can complete their studies (McGrath, 2011).

Johnson and Rochkind (2009) asserted the findings of the "Institute of Education Sciences, 2008" that some 2.8 million students enroll in some form of higher education each fall, in two-and four-year programs and public, private, online, and for-prop hit institutions. These young people are motivated enough to start college, and somehow they manage to find sufficient resources to enroll, but getting a Collage ID card, buying the books and showing up for class does not mean they are poised to complete a degree



(Johnson & Rochkind, 2009). Lippincott and German (2007) cited in Wang and Castaneda-Sound (2008) suggested that first-generation college students are considered a special population and possess unique needs. First-generation college students have to experience what is known as the culture shock (Cushman, 2007). Some students manage to survive it but others do not. According to (Cushman, 2007) a student named Milenny is an example of students who faced the culture shock. The report stated that, Milenny grew up in a Latino neighborhood of New York City. She won a scholarship to Wheaton College in suburban Massachusetts. Her Dominican Republic immigrant parents pressured her to stay home but Milenny wanted to explore the larger world (Cushman, 2007). When Milenny arrived at college, she realized that she had new bridges to cross. At her high school, most students had come from low-income families of color, now she was joining a largely white student body accustomed to privilege and status. Moreover, after her first few weeks of college classes, her academic confidence was shaken. Milenny remembers how she cried and was homesick in college. She felt stupid and she should not be there, as she told her cousin (Cushman, 2007). During their first few months of college, many first-generation college students face the same hurdles Milenny did. They feel the tensions of entering new territory, and their parents are unable to reassure them. Their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong. Horn (1998) cited in (Cushman, 2007) suggests that these kinds of cultural tensions may be one reason that almost one-fourth of first-generation college students who enter four-year colleges in the United States do not return for a second year.

On the other hand, first-generation college students are often shocked by the social and academic climate. Cushman (2007) cited a student named Jackie, who had attended high school in a low-income area and entered Colorado University. Jackie explained how she was so nervous going in there because all these white people were dressed nice and how she assumed they had money, they probably went to really good schools. She said that she was intimidated. Although, Jackie did well in her humanities classes, at the beginning she found herself academically unprepared for the university's premedical program. Differences in their families' income, their social styles, and sometimes their accent cause many first-generation college students to feel they do not belong. They face many challenges making friends, which invites all the identity issues of late adolescence. Those students will be able to focus on their classes and their academic goals only if they have great deal of self-esteem and determination (Cushman, 2007).

Minority students always have a very busy and rather difficult time on campus. According to Altman and Snyder (1970) cited in Williams and Butler (2010), they are plagued by money problems, are working very hard in their studies, have to remake the social and even the physical environment, and have to follow their path in a curriculum which did not originally take them into account (Altman & Snyder, 1970). Also, students who came from homes in which a language other than English is often spoken performed below students whom English is the dominant language ("National Assessment of Education Progress," 1982).

Coffman (2011) suggests that lack of critical thinking or decision-making skills usually influence academic success negatively. Langhout, Drake, and Rosselli (2009)

noted that a person's developmental history correlates with dropout rates. According to Coffman (2011) researchers argue that childhood problems can lead to poor decision-making. Also, family background influence the mistakes first-generation college students make in choosing their courses, managing time, and not knowing how to perform the student role. Researchers, also, argue that family background has a great influence on educational aspirations (Terenzini & Rendon, 1994). Orbe (2004) notes that first-generation college students in general lack significant sense of communal identity. First-generation college students have lower educational aspirations than their second-generation counterparts according to Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996). Additionally, Warburton, Burgarin, and Nunez (2001) observed that first-generation college students are less likely to remain enrolled in a four-year institution or be on a track to a bachelor's degree. Smith (2004) cited in Coffman (2011) points out that class studies confirm that low-income levels greatly affect some factors such as making a support network, college debt, and degree completion for the first-generation college students. According to Smith (2004) cited by Coffman (2011) students of lower socioeconomic status have reduced access to college and are increasingly marginalized on campuses. Howard and Levine (2004) found that if first-generation college students attend college, poorer students frequently leave with debt and no degree.

Arum and Roska (2010) asserts that the dropout rate of first-generation college students is clearly a concern for university administrators and many universities are increasingly introducing measures aimed at addressing this threat. However, many of the programs designed to curb the high rate of first-generation student attrition in universities fail to achieve their intended purpose because of a lack of consensus in regards to what

the causes of high dropout rates actually are (Boden, 2011). In order for any form of response to work, it must be directly formulated to address or to respond to the actual cause of a problem. According to Benitez and DeAro (2004) however, unfortunately in designing retention programs many college administrators find themselves addressing symptoms rather than the root causes of the problems that lead to high rate of first-generation college student dropout. The problem of social adjustment for university students and especially first-generation students has been the main theme in most university programs aimed at boosting student retention.

McGrath (2011) suggests that being able to come up with effective retention strategies is a factor of ascertaining when the problems that eventually lead to first-generation college student dropout occur. Statistics from McKay and Estella (2010) indicate that around 25% of first-generation college students who join four-year universities drop out in their freshman year. This is a clear indication that the problems that force first-generation college students to discontinue their university studies start to affect them immediately they join college or even before they join college (McGrath, 2011).. According to McKay and Estella (2010), out of every 100 first-generation students who persist beyond their freshman year at university, only 18 leave without earning a degree. McGrath (2011) attributes this to accumulation of stressors that these students begin to experience as soon as they join university. These stressors are rooted in the lack of money to finance their studies, academic unpreparedness before joining university and lack of confidence (Horwedel, 2008; Oseguera, Locks & Vega, 2009; Gibbons & Borders, 2010 & Early, 2010).

A majority of retention programs in universities tend to focus on social adjustment problems but as Boden (2011), Choy (2001) and Lee, Sax, Kim and Hagedorn (2004) noted, while difficulties with social adjustment could be a contributor to high dropout rates among first-generation students, it is to a great extent a symptom of other problems rather than the root cause of college attrition. Various researchers including Longwell-Grice (2003), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) propose that other issues such as financial difficulties and family commitments are more to blame for high attrition rates among first-generation college students as opposed to social adjustment problems. For instance Longwell-Grice (2003) is of the view that rather than concentrating on social adjustment issues as the key contributor to high dropout rates among first-generation students, universities should design programs that address the existing traits which manifests themselves in the form of social adjustment issues.

### **Summary**

When it comes to dealing with the main factors behind first-generation college students' dropout and retention, there are many interacting variables to be considered. Clearly, the interplay between these factors will vary substantially for each college students. These factors can be identified: lack of advice concerning students' subjects of study, problems related to examinations, lack of advice on college study techniques, problems regarding residential school procedures, problems in understanding subject content and difficulties in getting meaningful feedback, lack of motivation, lack of confidence and fear of failure, and lack of financial support. Some of these factors and difficulties are individual student problems, and some are colleges and universities related.

To sum up, the literature review in this study dealt with the first-generation college students through three variables or themes. The first variable was the importance of education and higher education to society's progress and the family wellbeing. Education is thought to be a reliable index of achieving social mobility and family stability, it is a major tool which enables family to meet the responsibility placed on it by society, and education is a key medium for interaction of family and society. Many families have realized that education is power and with education they will be able to shape their destiny. The second variable was the hurdles and challenges which first-generation college students face during the course of study. These challenges force them to perform poorly or even drop out completely. The study examined that theme through four sets of factors: 1- inadequate academic preparation factors such as parents lack of information about college, being unfit academically, lack of critical thinking or decision-making skills, and false expectations; 2- social factors such as cultural background, facing the cultural shock, ignorance about the value of relationship-building, differences in the income; 3- financial factors such as parents, and students lack of information of college cost, fees and tuitions, lack of money to support themselves and their families, and lack of financial aid; 4- institutional factors such as campus climate, transitional issues, and interaction with peers, faculty and staff. All these factors affect first-generation college students negatively and inadequately prepare them for successful navigation through the academic minefield of higher education. The third theme focused on educational institutions and researchers efforts to retain students until they graduate and receive a degree. It was clear through the literature that previous retention programs addressed symptoms rather than the root causes of the problems that lead to high rate of

first-generation college student dropout. A majority of retention programs in universities tend to focus on social adjustment problems, while difficulties with social adjustment could be a contributor to high dropout rates among first-generation college students; it is to a great extent a symptom of other problems rather than the root cause of college attrition.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### Introduction

The basic assumption of this study was that first-generation college Students face many challenges more than their other peers do, and these challenges force them to struggle during the course of study or even drop out completely from college without getting a degree. As it was pointed out in the literature review of this research, in general students are more likely to drop out if they face more challenges and negative factors than getting support. These factors can be identified: lack of advice concerning students' subjects of study, problems related to examinations, lack of advice on college study techniques, problems regarding residential school procedures, problems in understanding subject content and difficulties in getting meaningful feedback, lack of motivation, lack of confidence and fear of failure, and lack of financial support. Some of these factors and difficulties are individual student problems, and some are colleges and universities related. Clearly, the interplay between these factors will vary substantially for each college students. To be able to affirm the hypothesis in this research, first-generation college students face many challenges finishing their study and getting a degree, a survey questionnaire was designed to serve the purpose.



## **Research Methods**

This study took place at Rowan University. A survey was designed to collect data from college students themselves. The purpose of this survey was to identify the factors that affect first- generation college students negatively, which might lead them to perform poorly or even drop out from college completely without getting a degree. For this purpose a survey questionnaire was conducted through the Rowan University pool. Participants were 18 years of age or older at the time of this study.

For this study potential participants were required to complete a survey by answering some questions about themselves and their experiences with higher education. The students' participation in the survey did not exceed 15 minutes. There were no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and participants were free to withdraw their participation at any time without penalty. Participants were informed that, their responses would be anonymous and all the data gathered would be kept confidential. Participants were 84 graduate and under-graduate college students (see Appendix A).

## **Procedures**

This research was a short-term study. It was based on data collected through a survey of 18 questions. Participants were asked to specify their gender and if they were first-generation college students. Participants were asked, if they worked while they attended college, received financial aid from parents or the government, if their parents spoke another language other than English at home, and if they received any negative views because of their culture at the university. Participants were instructed that by taking this survey they agreed that any information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for publication or education provided that they were in no way

identified and their names would not be used. Participation did not imply employment with the state of New Jersey, Rowan University, the principal investigator, or any other project facilitator (see Appendix A).

## Chapter 4

### Results

The hypothesis of this study was that first-generation college Students face many challenges that their peers non-first generation college students do not face, and these challenges make them struggle during the course of study or drop out completely from college without earning a degree. In the literature review for this research, it was referred to some of these challenges. First-generation college students in general are more likely to drop out if they: 1. do not feel they have been placed on the right course, 2. applied late to college, late find it difficult to make friends or receive negative views because of their culture, 4. have difficulty to get in at the start of their course, 5. are less satisfied that their course is interesting, 6. are less satisfied with the quality of teaching, less are less satisfied with their course timetable, 8. are less satisfied with help either to get a job or to go to university, 9. have difficult financial or family circumstances, 10. have their fees waived or reduced, and 11. are male (Anonymous. "Education & Training, 1999"). To be able to affirm these factors a survey questionnaire was designed to facilitate obtaining the targeted data and information.

A correlational analysis test was performed to explore the relationship among the variables in order to examine if these negative factors, which were referred to, were present and related or not. Although it is unfortunate that the survey sample did not have much diversity to explore the effect of the culture negative views factor and the effect of the accent because of using another language besides home, still the research predictors highly pushed in favor of the hypothesis. In general, most of the subjects in the sample went to college full-time, worked, supported someone else besides themselves, and

received financial aid. The correlation analyses test showed that some of the participants' responses were related. Results indicated that question #2 (gender), was related to question #4 (if they attended college part-time or full-time). It was found that both genders males and females chose to be full-time students. Question #4 (gender), question #11 (receiving financial aid from parents), and question #14 (students financially support someone besides themselves) were related. Most full-time students received financial aid from parents and supported someone else besides themselves. Question #11 (receiving financial aid from parents) and question #13 (employment status) are related. Most students who received financial aid from parents, worked part-time. Question #13 (employment status) and question #14(receiving financial aid from parents) and question #14(supporting someone else besides themselves) are related. Most students who worked part-time supported someone else besides themselves. The correlation analyses test last indication is that, question #14 (supporting someone else besides themselves) is related to question #16 (receiving negative views for the culture). Most students supported someone else besides themselves but did not receive any negative views for their culture.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion and Conclusions

This study has attempted to do two things. It has focused, in finding and locating the problems first-generation college students face, and it has offered some suggestions to what can be done to help first-generation college students stay in college until they finish and receive a degree. In summary, first-generation college students and students in general are more likely to drop out if they: 1. do not feel they have been placed on the right course, 2. applied late to college, 3. find it difficult to make friends or receive negative reviews because of their culture, 4. have difficulty to set in at the start of their course, 5. are less satisfied that their course is interesting, 6. are less satisfied with the quality of teaching, 7. are less satisfied with their course timetable?, 8. are less satisfied with help either to get a job or to go to university, 9. have difficult financial or family circumstances, 10. have their fees waived or reduced, or 11. are male (Anonymous. "Education & Training, 1999").

This study offered some suggestions that might help eliminate obstacles which first-generation college students could face. Some of these suggestions are; allowing part-time students to qualify for more financial assistance; offering more weekends and evening courses; cutting the cost of tuitions, fees and textbooks; and providing childcare during classes. More counseling services on college retention should be designed to help college students have a better understanding for college life and its demands. Students should be provided with programs to help them Learn how to shift between cultures. The least popular solutions to reducing the percent of first-year college dropout students are offering more on line classes and simplifying the college-application process.

The present study aimed at investigating the challenges first-generation college students' face which make them perform poorly or even drop out from college completely. The study, also, suggests that these negative factors, mentioned earlier, first-generation college students and all other students face. The study assumptions and expectations were partially confirmed. If the sample had been more diverse, or if a sample of this population of students had been interviewed, probably, a full confirmation for the study hypothesis could have been reached. These findings are not surprising in light of the research predictions and assumptions. These negative factors, also, do not have to be present all at the same time for a student to perform poorly or to drop out of college. For instance, if the factor of working while studying is present alone, it could be by an enough sole factor to force a first-generation college or any college student to drop out of college.

What can be done to help students remain in college? Hillary Pennington, a Gates Foundation education official, believes the two main factors associated with completion of college are a student's going to college immediately after high school, and being a full-time student (Johnson & Rochkind, (2009). However, when dropouts who participated in a Gates Foundation study were asked to rate possible solutions to the problem, they thought the most favorable solutions were allowing part-time students to qualify for more financial assistance; offering more weekend and evening courses; cutting the cost of tuition, fees, and textbooks; and providing childcare during classes. The least popular solutions to reducing the percent of first-year college dropout students were offering more on line classes and simplifying the college-application process (Lewin, 2009). In summary, the main reason for the high rate of first-generation college students' dropout is

students need to survive, and they simply cannot survive in today's economy without holding down a job, and when the stress of working is coupled with that of going to school, not to mention the hardship of raising a family, students buckle under the stress. That is why parents, as well as the educational system, must provide students with as much financial assistance as possible. Otherwise, many who might have graduated and found well-paying jobs, as well as a feeling of accomplishment, will instead contend themselves with menial jobs and live out their lives wondering "what if?"(Coozadkiewicz, edited by Elizabeth Wistrom, 2012)

First-generation students revealed in their reflections on the college transition, what a challenge to remain true to themselves in an environment where they differ from the norm. To keep that balance means changing, but it also means not abandoning their roots. They learn what both the old and new settings require, and they will always move in and out of different cultures (Cushman, 2007). Education specialists suggest that parents talk with their children about time management, and students should establish connection with other students through campus organizations and activities because this will help their transition to college life and receive peers' support.

During the process of designing and implementing a retention program, college administrators usually focus on student inefficiencies but this approach has been found to be ineffective. This is due to the fact that focusing on a student's inefficiencies tends to focus on the identification and treatment of student's remedial issues; academic shortcomings and similar defects. Clifton and Anderson (2002) however note that while an approach that focuses on student shortcomings may work to some extent; it is never as effective as an approach that focuses on student's strengths as opposed to their

weaknesses. An example of a strength-focused approach of student retention is “Hope”. Snyder, Cheavens and Michael (1999) cited in Williams and Butler (2010) is an especially effective construct that can assist college administrators in their efforts to create retention programs targeting first-generation students.

Grant-Vallone, Reid and Umali, (2003) suggests that counseling services had a positive impact on retention. The study asserts that Wilson, Mason and Ewing (1997) followed up with students two years after they received counseling services, and found that those who received counseling did have a retention advantage to those who did not receive counseling. Similarly, Turner and Berry (2000) found that students with various personal problems reported that their academic performance had improved as a direct result of the support services they received from a college counseling center. Finally, parents should be involved more in their children educational life. Existing studies show that parental involvement plays an extremely crucial role in children’s education and development (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

Additional research is needed to identify strategies that can measurably mitigate the feelings of marginalization and inadequacy certain students encounter as they try to reconcile previous life experiences with life as a college student. Further attention should be given to finding ways to help these students bridge their communities of origin with their academic communities ( Conley & Hamlin, 2009).

### **Study Limitations**

This study explores the main factors behind first-generation college students’ dropout and retention. The survey questionnaire of a sample of 84 participants, though rich in qualitative value, can only provide only limited knowledge of an entire first-



generation college students' population. Furthermore, with the wide variety of factors and challenges first-generation college students face, it is not clear if the experiences of these students would apply to students living in different areas of the United States. Also, the study did not have qualitative interviews for a sample of students to obtain in-depth data and determine if there were no other factors involved. The sample also did not have the culture diversity hoped for; the culture diversity sample might have provided us with other cultural related disadvantages challenge this population. However, the findings of this study suggest potential directions for application and further investigations.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Clearly, there is a need for more first-generation college students to pursue, finish, and receive higher education degrees. The research findings, taken together with the prior literature, suggest that first-generation college students face many hurdles and pressures that hold them back and interrupt their path towards earning a degree. The main question remains: How can colleges, universities, and institutions of higher education facilitate the task for the first-generation college students to earn a college degree? This study suggests researchers in the education field better consider two issues. First, it seems that there is not enough research to locate all the factors behind the dropout of this population of college students. Second, most of the previous solutions and remedies were not effective as they were expected to be. Therefore, there is a need for further examination and research concerning the retention and dropout issues.

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## Appendix A

Rowan University

Informed Consent Form

The Main Factors behind First-Generation College Students Retention and Dropout

The purpose of this survey is to locate the factors that affect first generation college students negatively, which might lead them to perform poorly or even drop out from college. The research, entitled "First-Generation College Students Retention, and Dropout" is being conducted by Ahmed Hussein of Education Department, Rowan University, in partial fulfillment of his M.A. degree in School Psychology. You must be at least 18 years of age in order to participate in this study. For this study you will be required to attempt to complete a survey and answer some questions about yourself and your performance at your study. Your participation in the study should not exceed 15 minutes. There are no physical or psychological risks involved in this study, and you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

The data collected in this study will be combined with data from previous studies and will be submitted for publication in a research journal. Your responses will be anonymous and all the data gathered will be kept confidential.

By taking this survey you agree that any information obtained from this study may be used in any way thought best for publication or education provided that you are in no way identified and your name is not used.

Participation does not imply employment with the state of New Jersey, Rowan University, the principal investigator, or any other project facilitator.

If you have any questions or problems concerning your participation in this study, please contact Ahmed Hussein @ hussei01@students.rowan.edu or his faculty advisor,

Dr. Roberta Dihoff, dihoff@rowan.edu

Signature:

### The Survey Questions

1- What is your major ( ..... )

Please choose all that apply;

2- Gender (1- Male 2- Female.)

3- Are you a first generation college student? (1- Yes 2- No)

4- Are you a (1-Full time 2-Part time) student?

5- Are you a (1- freshman 2- sophomore 3- junior 4- senior 5- Graduate)?

6- You decided to go to college to achieve

(1-Better job pay 2- Better career 3-Both 4- Other).

7- If your answer to Question 6 was other, why did you decide to go to college?

8- Do your parents use another language at home besides English? (1- Yes 2- No.)

9- Is your experience at the college the same as you expected?

(1- Same as you expected 2- Different than you expected)

10- Does that make you (1- Happy 2-Unhappy)?

11- Do you receive any financial aid from your parents? (1- Yes 2- No)

12- Do you receive any financial aid from the government? (1-Yes 2- No)

13- Do you work? (1- No 2- Part time 3- Full time)

14- Do you financially support someone besides yourself? (1- Yes 2- No)

15- Do you find it difficult to study and work at the same time? (1- Yes 2- No,)

16- Do people view you negatively because of your culture? (1- Yes 2- No)

17- What is your GPA (1- under 2.0 2- Between 2.0-2.99 3- Between 3.0-3.99 4- 4.0)

18- Do you think you will graduate on time? (1- Yes 2- No)

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