Exploring the Expectations and Experience Gap in the First College Year: How do First-Generation Students Fare?

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Expectations Matter

Consequences for unmet expectations are high. Disappointed students fail to optimize their college experience, leave institutions, and sometimes abandon higher education all together.


Expectations and Student Success

Students set in place in their first semester of college patterns that will serve them across their years in college. Schilling & Schilling (2004), in Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student

Institutions must:
- explore students’ expectations
- focus more on communicating expectations of students than on meeting student expectations

Miller, T., Bender, B., Schuh, J., & Associates (2005)

Conceptual Model: Expectations and Experiences

Student Engagement

Expectations & Experiences in the First Year of College

BCSSE

- BCSSE designed for entering first-year students as a companion to NSSE
- Measures:
  - pre-college academic and co-curricular experiences
  - expectations for educationally purposeful activities during college
BCSSE Instrument

• Launched in 2007 after three pilots
• Provides information about incoming students' experiences and expectations
• Pair with NSSE administration to examine gap between expectations and engagement

Expectations & Experiences: BCSSE-NSSE

Many BCSSE questions match NSSE

BCSSE-NSSE shared items

• Hours: Preparing for class (studying); Working for pay (on & off campus); Participating in co-curriculars; Relaxing, socializing
• Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions
• Made a class presentation
• Discuss grades with faculty
• Worked with other students on projects during class
• Discussed ideas from readings/classes with faculty outside class
• Discussed ideas from readings/classes with others
• Received prompt feedback on your academic performance
• Serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity and those who differ from you - religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values
• Paper project requires integration
• Put ideas together
• Tried to better understand others view
• Learn something that changed

Expectations for Studying

1. What percent of entering students expect to study, on average, more than 15 hours per week?
   (a) 29%  (b) 38%  (c) 46%  (d) 60%
   d. 60% BCSSE

What percent actually do this in their first year? 41%

Worrisome Gap? Time spent studying

• First-year students average about 13-14 hrs. per week studying
• 60% of entering students expected to spend more than 15 hrs per week preparing for class
• Entering first-year students EXPECT to study more than they actually do in college
Prompt Feedback on Performance

2. What percent of entering students report they expected to frequently ("often or very often") receive prompt feedback on their academic performance?
(a) 46%  (b) 58%  (c) 71%  (d) 80%
(c) 71% BCSSE

What percent actually report this in their first year? 58%

Where Did New Students Most Miss the Mark?

New students expected to do all these things significantly MORE than they actually did...
- Make a class presentation
- Work with faculty outside of courses
- Discuss ideas with faculty outside class
- Work with classmates outside of class on assignments, projects

Where Did New Students Most Hit the Mark?

New students expectations were closest to experience on these items (but still less than what they expected)
- Discussing ideas with family, friends outside of class
- Receive prompt feedback about performance

Some Educational Activities are Unusually Effective

Growing evidence that “high-impact practices” provide substantial educational benefits to students

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<th>High Impact Activities</th>
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<td>First-Year Seminars and Experiences</td>
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<td>Common Intellectual Experiences</td>
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<td>Learning Communities</td>
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<td>Diversity/Global Learning</td>
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<td>Service Learning, Community-Based Learning</td>
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<td>Capstone Courses/</td>
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Percentage “Plan to Do” vs. “Done”: High Impact Practice Experiences

- Undergrad Research: FY Expect 36% vs. SR Done 20%
- Study Abroad: FY Expect 43% vs. SR Done 15%
- Internship: FY Expect 76% vs. SR Done 50%
Do Students Experience High-Impact Practices To the Extent they Expect?

Nope.

In fact, High-Impact Practices Only Reach A Fraction of Students.

Variation by First-generation, racial-ethnic, and major

Inventory Interest in HIPs

- Tulane’s NSSE FY “expect to do” results showed high levels of interest in 3 HIPs: Internships (71%), Undergraduate Research (44%), Study Abroad (62%)
- Used results to make the case to expand opportunity
- Created Center for Engaged Learning & Teaching to foster HIPs

Overall: Student Engagement Expectations-Experience Gap

- Less than a quarter of FY students report experiences that are HIGHER than they expected
- About 30% experiences MATCH expectations
- The majority (45-60% of FY students) report experiences that are LOWER than what they expected

To Ponder....

- What’s your response to the mismatch?
- What does this suggest for FYE?

First Generation Student Concern

For most of the 4.5 million low-income, first-generation students enrolled in postsecondary education today (approximately 24% of the undergraduate population), the path to the bachelor’s degree will be long, indirect, and uncertain.

- Engle & Tinto, 2008

Defining First-Generation Students

NSSE & BCSSE definition: No parent or guardian having graduated with a 4-year college degree consistent with US Dept of Ed definition – neither parent has earned a BA degree, but may have some post-secondary education
First-Gen Students Entering Disposition

- Parent encouragement to go to college high, double since 1971
- Reason to go to college “to make more money” 77% first-gen vs. 70% non-FG; being “well-off” more important to FG
- FG lower self-rating on leadership ability, self-efficacy is an issue for most FG students (beliefs about their abilities)

Source: CIRP, 40 years of trend data

First-Gen HS Experience

- What % of beginning college students spent 5 hrs. or less per week studying in HS?
  - a) 20%
  - b) 36% [Corrected]
  - c) 45%
  - d) 58%
  - b) 36% Do FGs study more or less?
  - Less. 43% vs. 33% non-FG
  - FG expect to work for pay in college; 51% work 10+ hrs, vs. 34% non-FG

Source: BCSSE overall results 2011

First-Gen HS Experience

- First-Gen study less, and work for pay more, than non-FGs
- FGs have significantly lower perceptions of their academic preparation, and lower expectations to persevere in face of academic difficulty vs. non-FGs

Source: BCSSE overall results 2011

Expectation/Experience Gap Comparing FG to Non-FG

- First-Gen and Non First Gen mostly similar
- Differed on the following:
  - FG more than non-FG
  - FG less than non-FG

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<th>Exp</th>
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<tr>
<td>Make class presentation</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work with peers during class</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss grades/assign w/ fac</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>=</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss ideas w/ others outside class</td>
<td>-</td>
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Co-curricular Involvement FY Students First-Gen Status – “% 0 hrs in Activities”

- FG’s delay getting involved until they feel they have “their academic lives under control”

- 6% Expect in College vs. 2% Actual in College
- 37% Expect in College vs. 22% Actual in College

Source: NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement)
First-Gen Student Educational Experiences and Expectations

• Which enriching experiences are First-Gen students less likely to have done in their first year or “plan to do” than non-FGs?
  – Learning community (done)
  – Service-Learning, and community service (done)
  – Attend art exhibit, play, dance, music, theater, or other performance
  – Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op
  – Study Abroad
  – Undergraduate Research

First-Gen vs. Non-FGs

• FG Less Likely:
  – Undergraduate Research
  – Study Abroad
  – Attend an art exhibit, play, dance, music, theater, or other performance

• FG Equally Likely:
  – Participate in a learning community
  – Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment
  – Service-Learning, Community service

Percentage First-Gen vs. Non First-Gen: High-Impact Practice Experiences

Advanced Education Aspirations

• FG have lower aspirations for advanced degrees from the outset
• FG students made significantly smaller increases in the highest degree they planned to obtain than Non-FGs over their years in college

Source: Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004

What to Do?

• Colleges and universities, for all the benefits they bring, accomplish far less for their students than they should. -- Derek Bok

• The first year presents a unique opportunity to engage students in the habits of learning. -- John Gardner

Responses to Minding the Gap

1. Increase institutional fit. (what about students with limited college choice?).
2. Institution must adjust, better meet expectations.
3. Be mindful of how expectations shape behavior, find ways to learn about students’ expectations, articulate expectations for students.
4. What else?
Effective Practices for First-Gen, Students

- Strategies that work to support first-generation students are successful for the general population as well (however, the reverse is not always true).
- Must tailor and target practices for first-generation students
- Develop FG responsive pedagogy, practices

Mentoring

- FG paired with trained mentor who facilitates integrated support for academic, career, and personal growth.
- Mentor serves as a student’s point person.
- Meetings with mentors include discussions on academic progress, self-management, character development, career exploration, mock interviews, internships, and networking.

Culture of Academic Success & Support

- Communicate high expectations for success
- Teach students how to “do the college student role” – be more explicit about how to study, assignments, office hours... (Collier & Morgan, 2008)
- Faculty should motivate students to aspire to high academic standards through feedback about their academic performance, and do so sensitively, such that students do not become discouraged

Facilitate Peer Support

- Leverage the power of peers
- Link peers to FY seminars, advising programs, gateway courses, formal & informal mentoring, tutoring...Peer mentors can be older, first-generation students

Historically underrepresented students benefit substantially from High-Impact Practices

- Must introduce HIPs early and often -- get experience on students radar
- Explore students’ assumptions about practices (who participates, cost, demands, etc.) – debunk myths
- Expose students to “mini-HIPs” (short term study abroad, research in a course)
First Generation Student Success

• College is within reach of virtually all students, but not all are equally likely to succeed.
• Institutions can’t change the lineage of its students – but can implement interventions that increase the odds that first-generation students get in, get the most out of the experience, and get through.