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# Introductory Essay
# *eJournal of Public Affairs* Special Issue on First-Generation College Students

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Interested in continuing the conversation focused on first-generation college students? Please plan to attend our "Celebrating First-Generation College Students: From Convocation to Graduation" conference being held on Friday, September 27, 2019, at Missouri State University. For additional information, please contact Tracey Glaessgen at TraceyGlaessgen@missouristate.edu.

As guest editors of this special issue, we wanted to focus on the many ways that institutions of higher education can support first-generation college students. These students— defined as those whose parents did not complete a four-year degree—represent a growing and increasingly important population within colleges and universities. First-generation students often hail from diverse backgrounds and bring a wealth of valuable experiences to the college environment. They are also becoming an increasingly important part of institutional recruitment and retention plans.

As such, we wanted to showcase how colleges and universities can assist this unique and valuable population in gaining the social and cultural capital needed to succeed in college. Though resources available to colleges and universities are often limited, enhanced retention and degree completion for first-generation students can be a key factor in supporting and improving institutional outcomes. Even more importantly, completing a college degree can significantly impact a first-generation student's future prospects as well as improve the life of their family and enrich their community.

This issue of the *eJournal of Public Affairs* includes one featured article, three research-driven articles, and a book review. Each of these works centers on first-generation college students and how universities can help them succeed.

To begin, Joe Cuseo's featured article, "First-Generation Students: Who Are They? Why Are They at Risk? How Can We Promote Their Success?," provides a concise overview of the characteristics frequently associated with first-generation college students, the obstacles they often encounter, and suggestions for how institutions of higher learning can better support them.

"Improving College Outcomes for First-Generation Students," by Janet Holt and Laura Winter, continues the conversation surrounding institutional support initiatives and programs that can be established—often at low costs—to improve retention and graduation outcomes.

"The First-Year Seminar: A Program Evaluation of Students' Public-Affairs Awareness," by Yasuko Kanamori, Tracey Glaessgen, and Jeffrey Cornelius-White, explores the results of a program study designed to assess the effectiveness of student learning outcomes in relation to public-affairs awareness in a university's first-year seminar.

Ryan Reed, Nicole Thomson, and Grace Bramman highlight a specific program in their article "The Impact of Wyman's Teen Leadership Program on College Achievement and Retention." They analyze the results of this program, which was specifically designed for first-generation and low-income students pursuing a college degree.

Finally, this *eJournal* issue closes with a review by Jonathan Stubblefield of Kathleen Gabriel's book *Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom: Teaching to Close the Graduation Gap for Minority, First-Generation, and Academically Underprepared Students.*

We hope that you will gain useful insight~~s~~ from this special issue, along with inspiration for helping first-generation college students succeed at your home institutions.

## Authors

Dr. Tracey Glaessgen is the Associate Director, Center for Academic Success and Transition, which is part of a larger unit designed primarily to increase student success and retention initiatives, at Missouri State University. Previously, she worked in First-Year Programs as an assistant director and in the Academic Advisement Center as an academic advisor for undeclared students at Missouri State University. Additionally, she has taught writing courses, both at Missouri State University and Ozarks Technical Community College, as well as served in the university's writing center. She has presented at local, state, and national conferences and serves on university wide committees. Tracey earned a Bachelor of Arts in English, Master of Arts in English with Literature emphasis, Master of Arts in Writing with Rhetoric and Composition emphasis from Missouri State University, and Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership from University of Missouri. Her dissertation focused upon first-generation college students with undeclared majors, and she recently had an article published on the topic in the peer-reviewed NACADA Journal. She is currently completing a graduate certificate in Conflict and Dispute Resolution. Her research interests include first-generation students, academic advising, first-year seminars, and organizational analysis and conflict in higher education.

Mark Biggs has taught filmmaking at Missouri State University since 1986. He is currently the Associate Dean of the College of Arts & Letters, and coordinator of the interdisciplinary Electronic Arts program. He received the 2002 Governor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, and the 2007 MSU Foundation Award for Service. He served as the Chairman of the Missouri Film Commission from 2006 to 2009.

Mark Biggs is also an award-winning documentary filmmaker who studied at the American Film Institute and the University of Chicago. His documentary, ***The Ozarks: Just That Much Hillbilly in Me***, looks at the history, culture, and values of the people of the Ozarks. His film, ***As Seen by Both Sides: American and Vietnamese Artists Look at the War***, chronicles the first major cultural exchange between the U.S. and Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War. His earlier documentary on

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Rachelle Darabi is the Associate Provost for Student Development and Public Affairs at Missouri State University. Dr. Darabi holds a doctorate in Rhetoric and Composition with a cognate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). She held the position of Associate Vice Chancellor of Academic Success at Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne where she worked for nearly 20 years before coming to Missouri State University in 2008. Some of her many awards include Executive of the Year, Administrative Excellence, Outstanding Support and Service to the International Student Organization, Great Men and Women Award, and The John P. Ulmer Memorial Award in Recognition of Extraordinary Service and Long Standing Commitment to Minority and/or Disabled Students, and the MACADA Pacesetter Award.

Dr. Kelly Wood is professor of communication and Executive Director of the Center for Academic Success and Transition at Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. Before taking on her current position, she held the Provost Fellow for Student Success role for three years. The primary goal with this position was to impact positively student retention across a variety of student groups (e.g., first generation college, transfers, and online programs). Previous roles and positions include being the pre-major advisor for all communication students, four years as head of the department of communication, two years as Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Letters, and six years as assistant department head. She received her B.A. and M.A. in communication from the University of Dayton and her Ph.D. in communication studies from Ohio State University.

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# First-Generation Students: Who Are They? Why Are They at Risk? How Can We Promote Their Success?

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**Abstract**

Approximately one third of all undergraduate students in the United States today are first-generation students—that is, students with parents whose highest level of education was high school. This article examines the characteristics of first-generation students, identifies reasons why they are at risk for attrition, and offers specific strategies for improving their rate of college completion.

*Keywords*: first-generation students, at-risk students, student retention, college completion

# First-Generation Students: Who Are They? Why Are They at Risk? How Can We Promote Their Success?

Approximately one third of all undergraduate students in the United States today are first-generation students—that is, students with parents whose highest level of education was high school (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014). This article examines the characteristics of first-generation students, identifies reasons why they are at risk for attrition, and offers specific strategies for improving their rate of college completion.

## Characteristics of First-Generation Students

What defines and distinguishes first-generation students is that neither of their parents graduated from college. When a first-generation student graduates with a college credential, that student will be the first member of the family to do so.

The very act of attempting college is a "leap of faith" for first-generation students (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006). Once that leap is taken, it is followed by an even more challenging leap: persisting to college completion. Focus-group interviews with first-generation students conducted by Engle, Bermeo, and O'Brien (2006) revealed that these students felt that completing college was much more difficult than gaining access to college. As one student put it, "Getting into college is one thing. It's actually sticking it through that's the hard part" (Engle et al., 2006, p. 6). Such anecdotal reports from first-generation students are supported by quantitative data: Their college attrition rate is significantly higher than students who come from families with a college-going tradition. In fact, only about 50% of first-generation students earn a bachelor's degree within six years after college matriculation (DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tan, 2011).

Although the distinguishing characteristic of first-generation students is that neither of their parents graduated from college, they often have other characteristics in common (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Inkelas, Vogt, Daver, & Leonard, 2007). Typically, they are more likely to

- be members of underrepresented racial or ethnic groups;
- come from low-income families, receive little or no financial support from parents, work more hours per week while attending college, and to be part-time students;
- enter college academically underprepared and in need of developmental education; and,
- commute to college from home rather than live on campus.

These characteristics are also commonly associated with college attrition (Adelman, 2006; Attewell & Lavin, 2007; Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2003), working in combination to further increase the risk of first-generation students not completing college. Thus, if colleges wish to develop truly comprehensive plans for promoting the success of first-generation students, those plans should include strategies for addressing these related risk factors. However, addressing this constellation of factors alone will not be sufficient because even if a first-generation student has none of these related characteristics, that student still remains at higher risk for attrition (Glenn, 2008; Tinto, 2012). This finding suggests that first-generation student status is itself a risk factor, independent of other risk factors.

**Why Are First-Generation Students at Greater Risk for Attrition?**

Unearthing the root causes of first-generation students' attrition is the first step toward fostering their success. Once these underlying causes are identified, a retention program can then be designed intentionally to target them, and, in so doing, maximize that program's impact on student persistence,

The scholarly literature on first-generation college students point to four key factors that place them at higher risk for attrition. Each of these factors will be discussed in the following sections.

**Lack of Knowledge About College**

First-generation students are likely to enter college with limited information about how college works and how to navigate the postsecondary system (Stephens, Markus, Fryburg, & Johnson, 2012). They do not have family members at home who speak the "academic language" of higher education and who can pass on informal "tribal knowledge" about how college works. Said another way, compared to students from families with a college-going tradition, first-generation students have less "social capital"— norms and social networks that facilitate transfer of education from one generation to the next (Gonzalez, 2013)—and less "cultural capital"—knowledge and skills associated with higher socioeconomic status that are transmitted across generations (Passeron & Bourdieu, 1973).

**Doubt About Whether College Is Worth It**

First-generation students may doubt whether college is worth the time, effort, and money because no member of their immediate family has experienced the benefits of a college degree whom they can identify with and emulate (Davis, 2012). Focus-group interviews with first-generation students have revealed that many did not think going to college was necessary to get a good job. This was captured in the words of a first-generation student who did not initially see the economic value of a college degree but eventually came to realize it: "I was just like, 'Oh, I'll just work with my uncle or something and just help the family out.'

But, I mean, with a degree and everything, you make more money and you could help out more" (Engle et al., 2006, p. 20).

**Self-Doubt About Whether They Deserve to Be in College or Are "College Material"**

Because first-generation students have not witnessed anyone in their family succeed in college, they may experience what has been called the "impostor syndrome," the belief that they do not belong or deserve to be in college and that their academic inadequacies will soon be revealed (Whitehead & Wright, 2016). This belief can result in lower self-confidence and self-efficacy, as reflected in the following comment made by a first-generation student: "I knew I was gonna go to college, but I felt like I would probably end up flunking out 'cause both my parents did. So, I just thought I was gonna do the same thing" (Engle et al., 2006, p. 20). Meta-analyses of multiple research studies have revealed that academic self-efficacy is a potent predictor of student retention and academic achievement (as measured by GPA) (Robbins et al., 2004), particularly for underprepared and underrepresented students (Lent, Brown, & Larkin, 1987; Solberg, O'Brien, Villareal, Kennel, & Davis, 1993; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005).

**Insufficient Family Encouragement and Support**

First-generation students encounter not only academic barriers in higher education, but also cultural barriers (Engle & Tinto, 2008). The cultural norms, customs, and expectations of their families and home communities can sometimes conflict with the culture they encounter on campus (Rice et al., 2016). This cultural conflict can create tension and force first-generation students to live "simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither" (Rendón, 1992, p. 56). Their success in college hinges heavily on how well they transition between these two cultural worlds, and this transition can be either aided or impeded by the level of support they receive at home and on campus (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1993). Studies have shown that first-generation students' perception of family support influences their ability to manage the academic and emotional rigors of college (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Melendez & Melendez, 2010).

Continuing-generation students view and experience higher education as a natural "continuation" of high school life and their family's life, whereas first-generation students view and experience college as a disruptive "disjunction" (Engle et al., 2006). Many first-generation students report feeling motivated to complete college because doing so would make their parents proud and enable them to serve as role models for others in their family and community (Byrd & Macdonald, 2005; Wang, 2014). However, first-generation students commonly report strained relationships and/or lack of support from non-college-going family members and neighborhood friends (London, 1989, 1992; Olenchak & Herbert, 2002; Rosas & Hamrick, 2002; Terenzini et al., 1994; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). In fact, the families of first-generation students may resent or resist the student's decision to attend college because of the toll it takes financially (i.e., money expended for college expenses plus income lost from earnings the student could garner by working full-time to help support the family) and socially (i.e., time spent by the student on college studies and with college acquaintances that would otherwise be spent with the family).

The four aforementioned factors may account for first-generation students remaining at risk for attrition even after controlling for other risk variables. These factors also suggest that "the problem is as much the result of the experiences these students have *during* college as it is attributable to the experiences they have *before* they enroll" (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 3). Thus, the problem of first-generation student attrition may be alleviated by altering their "during college" experience through intentional practices designed to combat the very factors that cause them to be at risk in the first place.

## Practices for Promoting the Success of First-Generation Students

The following are recommended strategies designed to combat each of the previously cited causes of first-generation student attrition.

### Support Strategies: Lack of Knowledge About College

- Summer Bridge: a program lasting from one to six weeks that occurs during the summer between students' last term in high school and their first term in college, thus serving as a supportive "bridge" between high school and higher education.
- New-student orientation program that increases students' awareness and knowledge of key campus support services, their purposes and benefits, and how to access them.
- First-year experience course that extends support to students beyond orientation throughout their first term in college.
- College-entry assessments that evaluate new students' level of college readiness and that place students into moderately challenging courses commensurate with their entry-level skills.

### Support Strategies: Doubt About Whether College Is Worth It

- Intentionally and proactively articulating to students (e.g., via academic advising, first-year seminar, and exposure to alumni) the meaning and value of a college education and the benefits, both fiscal and personal, of a college degree.

- Academic advising that goes beyond class scheduling to help students formulate educational goals and connect their current academic experience to their future life plans.
- First-year experience course that actively engages students in the process of educational planning—for example, via course assignments in which students develop a long-range success plan that includes coursework, experiential learning, and career exploration.
- Co-curricular workshops designed to help students make meaningful decisions about a college major and potential career path.

**Support Strategies: Self-Doubt About Whether They Deserve to Be in College or Are "College Material"**

- First-year convocation ceremonies in which members of the college community assemble to personally welcome and celebrate first-generation students' entry into higher education.
- Peer-mentoring programs that connect first-generation students to other, more experienced and successful first-generation college students. Peer mentors and role models would include not only students who succeeded in college from the outset, but also peers who demonstrated grit by recovering from setbacks and converting those negative experiences into comebacks (e.g., students who recovered from early academic difficulties and went on to achieve academic success).
- Early-feedback practices that proactively inform students about the need to improve the quality of their academic performance before it leads to academic failure (e.g., early-alert/early-warning systems that deliver feedback during the first few weeks of the term; midterm grade reports; early low-stakes testing or non-graded practice assignments that students can use as feedback to identify productive and unproductive learning habits/strategies).
- Personalized correspondences that refer to students by name, recognize their efforts and accomplishments, and acknowledge their achievement of educational milestones. These correspondences might include personal e-mail messages congratulating students for successfully completing their first year in college, attaining academic excellence, or regaining good academic standing after being on academic probation.

**Support Strategies: Insufficient Family Encouragement and Support**

- A family orientation program held concurrently with new-student orientation to educate the families of first-generation students about the nature of the college experience, the benefits of a college degree, and how they can support the student's initial transition to college.
- A family weekend program offered during the fall term that provides information and support to families while the student's college experience is in progress.
- A family newsletter that apprises family members of key campus events, important deadlines, and timely strategies for supporting students at different stages of their college experience.
- Family support programs that allow family members to use campus facilities, access campus events, and enable families of first-generation students to connect with each other for mutual support.
- A family office staffed with specialists who can address a family's questions about their student's college experience and progress (including bilingual specialists who can communicate with family members whose primary language may not be English).

**Caveat**

When creating support programs for first-generation students, support agents should remain mindful of a phenomenon called "stereotype threat"—putting a group of at-risk students at further risk by confirming a negative stereotype about their group. Most of the research on stereotype threat has focused on African-American students (Steele & Aronson, 1995); however, this phenomenon is not limited to ethnic or racial groups. It can be experienced by any group that encounters stereotyped expectations of failure or poor performance, including groups whose membership is not based on visible or observable physical characteristics (see research cited at www.reducingstereotypethreat.org).

Certainly, recognizing the reality that first-generation students are at greater risk for attrition and offering support programs designed explicitly to reduce their risk for attrition is preferable to ignoring the problem and making no effort to combat it. However, support should be offered with an eye toward minimizing the risk of stigmatizing first-generation students and reducing their sense of self-efficacy. One way to reduce this risk is to avoid segregating or sequestering first-generation students in "special programs." Instead, whenever possible, support programs should enable first-generation students to interact frequently with continuing-generation students who have social capital (i.e., college knowledge) that first-generation students should be able to access and use. Customized programs that meet the unique needs of first-generation students can still be offered by creating first-generation “affinity groups,” such as forming subgroups of first-generation students during new-student orientation and encouraging first-generation students to form their own campus clubs or organizations. These affinity groups can be formed without sending a stigmatizing message that their purpose is to rescue its members from failure. Instead, like any other affinity group, first-generation affinity groups are formed among members who have common experiences to share, including sharing (and celebrating) their opportunity to be “first-in-the-family” college graduates.

## Conclusion

It is a disturbing irony that student groups who have the most to gain from completing a college degree (e.g., first-generation students) are often those least likely to do so. Not attaining a college credential has particularly negative impacts on the employment prospects of low-income, first-generation college students (Collins, 2009). It also adversely impacts the educational attainment of their children, since children of students who withdraw from college are themselves less likely to complete college (and high school) (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). Thus, college attrition among underserved student populations has a negative ripple effect that crosses generational boundaries (Kojuku & Nuñez, 1998).

On the other hand, effective efforts that promote the college completion of currently enrolled first-generation students will also benefit their children (and grandchildren) by increasing the likelihood that they, too, will become college graduates and experience the improved quality of life that comes with a college degree.

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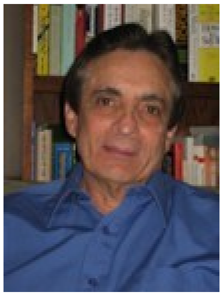

Joe Cuseo holds a doctoral degree in Educational Psychology and Assessment from the University of Iowa and Professor Emeritus of Psychology. He’s a 14-time recipient of the “faculty member of the year award” on his home campus—a student-driven award based on effective teaching and academic advising, a recipient of the “Outstanding First-Year Student Advocate Award” from the National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, and a recipient of the “Diamond Honoree Award” from the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) for contributions made to the field of student development and the Student Affairs profession.

Currently, Joe serves as a workshop facilitator and educational consultant for colleges and universities, including AVID for Higher Education—a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote the college access and success of underserved student populations. He has delivered hundreds of campus workshops and conference presentations across North America, as well as Europe, Asia, Australia, and the Middle East.

Joe has authored numerous articles and books on student learning, student retention, and faculty development, the most recent of which are:

*Peer-to-Peer Leadership: Research-Based Strategies for Peer Mentors & Peer Educators*

*Student-Faculty Engagement: Research & Practice*

*Thriving in College and Beyond: Research-Based Strategies for Academic Success & Personal Development*

*Humanity, Diversity, & The Liberal Arts: The Foundation of a College Education*

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# Improving College Outcomes for First-Generation Students

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**Abstract**

In this article, the authors describe a multi-site case study of five 4-year postsecondary institutions in Missouri that used evidence-based strategies to support first-generation students in their efforts to persist in and complete college. In the case study, data from qualitative interviews of university administrators in academic and student support services, as well as focus groups of underrepresented students, were analyzed and coded using grounded theory. The resulting themes were compared to prior research on first-generation students, resulting in three broad areas of evidence-based practice with potential to increase college success for first-generation students. These institutional practices included providing (a) a caring and coordinated community of support, (b) early college experiences, and (c) tutoring and mentoring supports. The authors present examples of each practice, along with implications for advancing policy, practice, and scholarship around college persistence and completion for first-generation students.

*Keywords*: first-generation, retention, tutoring, mentoring, first-year programs

First-generation students face more challenges in college than their peers whose parents have at least one college degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005; Ishitani, 2006). One of these challenges relates to their limited cultural and social capital in the higher education university environment (i.e., knowledge of the campus and its values; logistical knowledge of the admissions and financial aid application processes; understanding how to navigate key decisions regarding course load, academic advisement, and other academic supports; and general knowledge about higher education) compared to their peers with parents who have more college experience (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986; Coleman, 1988; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; McConnell, 2000; McDonough, 1997). Going off to college and leaving one's home support system is difficult for many students, but first-generation students face the added burden of entering their new college environment lacking key knowledge that would enable them to overcome their early challenges on campus.

Some early attempts to increase first-generation students' graduation rates focused narrowly on providing additional financial support to these students; however, it became clear that academic and other supports were needed to address these students' needs (Schorr, 2017). More recently, programs have adopted a more comprehensive approach, offering a range of student supports, such as mentoring and advising, financial aid, social supports, and institutional networking programs, while still capitalizing on the students' strengths (see Conefrey, 2018; Schwartz et al., 2017; Whitley, Benson, & Wesaw, 2018), in an effort to equip first-generation students with the knowledge and strategies that their continuing-generation peers may have directly or tacitly acquired from their families and college-going peers. In this study, we sought examples of promising comprehensive student support programs for first-generation students through a multi-site case study, identifying key components of these programs as well as the conditions and contexts by which they can be successfully replicated.

## Literature Review

### National Landscape for First-Generation Students

National studies have reported statistics on first-generation students' characteristics and college outcomes. First-generation students tend to be older and non-White, have dependents, and have lower median incomes than their peers (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2016). Additionally, because there is considerable overlap between first-generation and low-income status (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017), many first-generation students experience an additional layer of financial challenges while in college; consequently, they often work more hours and borrow more money (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2016). Moreover, first-generation students often attend postsecondary institutions with lower completion rates (e.g., for-profit, two-year, and online institutions) and are more likely to attend college part-time (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2016).

Nationwide data on college outcomes have indicated that first-generation students are less likely to complete their bachelor's degree in six years than their peers whose parents had at least some college experience (50% vs. 64%, respectively; DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, & Tran, 2011). When disaggregated by income status, there is a 15 percentage point six-year bachelor's degree completion gap for low-income students (41% vs. 56%) and a 19 percentage point six-year completion gap for non-low-income students (54% vs. 73%) between first-generation students and their peers (Pell Institute, 2018).

Although national data are essential for describing the state of affairs for first-generation students, these data are limited in their ability to explain why such patterns exist and what supports and strategies can help increase completion rates for first-generation students. As Pike and Kuh (2005) suggested, single institutional studies are needed to determine which interventions hold the most promise for supporting first-generation students to graduation.

**Identified Needs of First-Generation Students**

First-generation students tend to be less integrated into the college environment. Pike and Kuh (2005) reported that first-generation students were less engaged in college, less likely to participate in diverse college experiences, and also perceived college as less supportive. However, students with high educational aspirations and who lived on campus were much more likely to succeed, regardless of their generation status. These findings confirm the results of previous research indicating that having a peer support network of other college students who are academically engaged can help mitigate the challenges that first-generation students face when transitioning to college (Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Evidence of the importance of peer social interactions for first-generation students has been mixed (Astin, 1993; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Newcomb, 1962; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004), indicating perhaps that first-generation students' academic adjustment may depend more on co-curricular and structured academic activities than social interactions with peers (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, and Leonard (2007) suggested that first-generation students may rely on faculty or residence hall coordinators to provide these structured opportunities to integrate into the campus environment and make peer connections.

Besides facing the novelty of the college environment with less understanding of campus life, first-generation students are also less likely to be academically prepared for college (Choy, 2001; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Riehl, 1994; Terenzini et al., 1996; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001). Both the lack of familiarity with college and their perceptions of their college preparation may affect first-generation students' self-confidence after they enroll. However, first-generation students' self-confidence and self-efficacy, rather than objective measures of their academic preparation, were predictive of a smooth transition to college (Inkelas et al., 2007; Ramos-Sánchez, & Nichols, 2011). As Terenzini et al. (1994) noted, it may be particularly important for first-generation students to receive affirmation of their legitimacy as college students. This implies that once they believe in their self-worth as college students and have the right peer and academic supports, they are much more likely to achieve successful college outcomes.

## Support Structures for First-Generation Students

Student Support Services (SSS), a federal TRIO program, was designed to increase college retention, increase two-year to four-year transfer rates, and foster an institutional climate supportive of success for eligible students, that is, students who are low-income and first-generation, or are students with disabilities. Though each institution can tailor the program to its specific needs, all SSS programs include academic advising, and many also include academic tutoring and supplemental instruction, mentoring, career and other counseling services, and services designed specifically for students with disabilities. A recent longitudinal evaluation of SSS programs found that receiving student support services was associated with key measures of college retention and completion (Chaney, 2010). Specific programs driving this success included home-based programs (in which multiple services for students are coordinated through one "home" office on campus), blended programs (which blend SSS services with other services on campus), peer tutoring, labs, workshops, and services for students with disabilities (Chaney, 2010). In general, this evaluation affirmed the value of the types of advisement and services offered through TRIO offices on college campuses, in which students receive a combination of targeted supports for their particular needs.

**Tutoring and mentoring.** Research has suggested that tutoring is an especially important learning support for students who do not feel ready for college and/or have gaps in their knowledge base when entering college. Studies have indicated that students using tutoring services earned higher grades, withdrew from courses less, and performed better when retaking a course (Colver & Fry, 2016; Vick, Robles-Piña, Martirosyan, & Kite, 2015). Moreover, first-generation students attempting to retake a course who received tutoring services received higher grades than those who did not participate in tutoring (Colver & Fry, 2016). Tutees perceived peer tutoring as less threatening than having an adult tutor; for first-generation students, who often question their legitimacy for college, this may be important for making them more willing to ask questions and receive needed support. In previous studies, peer tutoring lowered anxiety and increased participative learning and self-disclosure, among other motivational benefits (Greenwood, Carta, & Kamps 1990; Topping, 1996).

Mentoring also provides benefits to students with limited knowledge of the campus environment, such as first-generation students. Mentors can provide guidance around key academic decisions, such as choosing classes and instructors and finding necessary campus supports. There is evidence that peer mentoring provides positive outcomes for mentees, including better grades and more successfully completed courses (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schütz, Carbon, & Schabmann, 2014), as well as increased knowledge of resources on campus, ability to work through difficulties in college, and higher self-esteem (Zevallos & Washburn, 2014).

Additionally, faculty mentoring has led to positive outcomes for first-generation students, including higher GPAs, more credit hours completed, and a lower dropout rate (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). Adult mentoring has also been associated with more positive attitudes and higher motivation for involvement in one's field (Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008). At a four-year college in Missouri, faculty research mentoring provided through a McNair Scholars program to first-generation, low-income students from their sophomore through their senior years increased retention rates, graduation rates, and graduate admission rates, and students attributed much of their preparation for graduate school to their mentors (Ishiyama, 2001). In sum, these studies provide evidence that both peer and faculty/staff mentors offer important benefits to students who need additional guidance in a higher education environment.

**Early college experiences.** Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds experience a high degree of "summer melt" in the summer between high school and college. Estimates of summer melt range from 15% to 40% of students intending to matriculate to college, and the percentages are particularly high for students from low-SES backgrounds (Castleman & Page, 2014). Colleges and universities try to address this alarming rate of "meltdown" by providing early college experiences to students—most commonly at-risk or conditionally admitted students—during the summer before their first semester or during their first year of college. Some of these early college experiences include pre-college orientations, summer bridge programs (SBPs), and first-year seminars.

Summer bridge programs are generally geared toward increasing college readiness in order to ease the transition to college and thereby increase retention. Conley's (2008) widely accepted definition of *college readiness* includes (a) cognitive skills such as problem solving or critical thinking; (b) key content areas such as math, writing, reading, or STEM; (c) academic behaviors for success, such as study skills and time management; and (d) "college knowledge" of the context of higher education and key student services. Most SBPs emphasize various components of this college-ready framework, but because of the wide-ranging activities that may be included, as well as the different populations SBPs serve, it is not surprising that the effects of SBPs on college retention have been mixed in prior research (see Sablan, 2014, for a summary). The most positive, direct effects on college outcomes in earlier studies were a successful transition to college (Kezar, 2000) as well as short-term effects of SBPs on math and writing course completion in the first year; however, there were no effects on longer term retention (Barnett et al., 2012; Cabrera, Miner, & Milem, 2013). Other positive effects of SBPs included higher academic skills and academic self-efficacy (Strayhorn 2011), as well as higher ratings of integration (Garcia, 1991). Caught in a cultural pull between their non-college peers and family, and their new college environment, first-generation students may need validation that they belong in that environment (Kezar, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996). As such, increasing academic self-concept, college knowledge, and community building may be important outcomes of SBPs and help ease the transition to college for these students.

First-year programs, the most common of which is the first-year seminar, comprise another effort to enhance first-year retention and integration. First-year seminars have been shown to have a significant, positive effect on retention (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), increasing second-year retention between 7 and 13 percentage points in two controlled studies. First-year programs benefited all demographic groups, based on age, ethnicity, gender, at-risk status, and whether students lived on or off campus. Other additional benefits of first-year programs included students' increased integration on campus, higher satisfaction with the college experience, and, perhaps most importantly, improved self-perception as learners (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006).

## Methods

In 2016, St. Louis Graduates (STLG), a collaborative network focused on eliminating equity gaps in degree completion for low-income students, first-generation students, and students of color, convened a task force to (a) identify those higher education institutions that are more successful in supporting and graduating underrepresented students from the St. Louis, Missouri, region, and (b) determine the strategies that institutions are using to graduate underrepresented students with less debt. This task force was led by the vice president for education strategies for the St. Louis Regional Chamber and the director of scholarships and donor services for the St. Louis Community Foundation and comprised higher education academic and student affairs leaders, representatives from nonprofit organizations that promote college student success, and key community members. The STLG project director (the second author) and the St. Louis Graduates' Higher

Education Recognition Task Force (hereafter referred to as the STLG Task Force) engaged the first author at the Illinois Education Research Council to lead a research project to address these two questions, resulting in a research report, *Degrees with Less Debt: Effective Higher Education Strategies for Underrepresented Student Populations* (Holt, White, & Terrell, 2017). This research project used statistical methods to identify five exemplary four-year institutions in Missouri (from a larger sample of 20 Illinois and Missouri institutions) which were supporting underrepresented undergraduate students (i.e., first-generation students, underrepresented minority students, and low-income students) from the St. Louis region to graduate with less debt.

Using a ranking calculation based on the median student debt at graduation and six-year graduation rates compared to predicted graduation rates for similar institutions, Holt, White, and Terrell (2017) created a success formula that identified the most successful institutions for underrepresented student populations. Additionally, the STLG Task Force created thresholds for serving a moderate number of low-income students (i.e., at least 25% Pell students) and graduating a moderate number of students, (i.e., at least a 50% six-year graduation rate overall). Based on the success formula, the five highest ranking institutions identified as graduating underrepresented students with less debt, in alphabetical order, were: Maryville University, Missouri State University-Springfield (MSU), Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO), the University of Central Missouri (UCM), and Webster University. It is important to note that, across the five institutions in this study, the average percent of first-generation students was three percentage points higher than the 20-institution average (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Description of Institutional Context and Outcomes*

| | Institutional Context | | | Outcomes | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Institution** | **Percent of Black and Hispanic Students[a]** | **Percent of First-Generation Students[b]** | **Percent of Pell Recipients[a]** | **Graduation Rates[a]** | **Student Loan Debt at Graduation[b]** |
| Maryville University | 13 | 35 | 27 | 67 | $24,165 |
| Missouri State University | 7 | 37 | 37 | 54 | $22,250 |
| Southeast Missouri State University | 10 | 43 | 40 | 50 | $22,480 |
| University of Central Missouri | 9 | 38 | 42 | 54 | $23,225 |
| Webster University | 44 | 33 | 38 | 62 | $24,625 |
| 5-Institution Mean | 17 | 37 | 36 | 57 | $23,349 |
| 20-Institution Mean (Min, Max) | 19 (6, 85) | 34 (10, 50) | 37 (6, 91) | 53 (9, 95) | $23,360 ($19,566, $27,869) |

*Note.* Reproduced with permission from Holt et al. (2017, p. 8).

[a]Source: IPEDS, fall 2013 and fall 2014 average total enrollment of Black students and Hispanic students; fall 2013 and fall 2014 average percent Pell enrolled; AY14 and AY15 average 6-year graduation rates.

[b]Source: College Scorecard, average of 2012 and 2013 student debt at graduation; fall 2012 and fall 2013 average first-generation enrollment.

In the second phase of the study, administrators and students from each of the five identified institutions were interviewed, with the goal of determining successful practices and strategies they employed to help underrepresented students graduate in six years or less with lower debt. In fall 2016, between three and five administrators across disciplines who were responsible for programs for the population of interest were interviewed at each institution; in addition, a focus group of underrepresented students was held at each site. All interviews were semistructured, with initial questions prepared in advance and follow-up questions developed over the course of the interview.

Employing a grounded-theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), five themes emerged around strategies and practices these institutions employed and how they employed them to achieve higher graduation rates with less student debt. Two of the five themes reflected the overall organizational culture of the university: university leadership and a coordinated and caring community. The other three themes reflected key strategies of student support: flexible and sufficient financial aid, early college experiences, and just-in-time academic supports (Holt et al., 2017).

While Holt et al.'s (2017) study identified effective supports for all underrepresented students, in the current study we focused on a select group of practices that research suggests are particularly beneficial to first-generation students. We limited our analysis to non-financial aid practices related to three of the themes in the original report—a coordinated and caring community, early college experiences, and just-in-time academic supports—to explore the academic and advising supports that are critical components of comprehensive services for first-generation students. We are mindful that financial aid is also a critical support for first-generation students; however, this has already been covered extensively in the literature (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, Kelchen, Harris, & Benson, 2016) and in our original report (Holt et al., 2017).

## Results

### Building a Caring and Coordinated Community of Support

In our research, several subthemes emerged within this area, including the importance of creating a sense of "family" for first-generation students on campus through faculty and peer relationships. Missouri State University created a special section of its first-year General Education Program (GEP) seminar after analysis of its own data found that the retention rate for first-generation students was 10% lower than for undergraduates overall. As previously noted, first-year college experiences considerably increase retention, as well as students' campus integration, self-perception as learners, and college satisfaction (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

At MSU, sections of freshman seminar were designated for first-generation students, creating a learning community of similar students who, through a strengths-based approach, built self-awareness and explored their unique assets and needs. Tinto (1998) recommended the establishment of learning communities, which blend social and academic engagement, to increase college retention and success, and these communities have been used successfully with first-generation students to increase integration and build self-awareness of their potential

(Conefrey, 2018; Inkelas et al., 2007; Suder Foundation, 2017; Thayer, 2000). Faculty leading these sections, many of whom were first-generation themselves, received intensive training on how to best support first-generation students. One key piece is that the faculty self-identified as first generation to the students and thus served as role models for first-generation students. As one MSU student commented:

> "My first year, I was a 'first generation' and an 'undecided' student. I was in a special section that was a small amount of students. Connection with the teacher was encouraged, and she helped me in the path to deciding a major. She helped me work through those emotions you have initially, of a 'lack of direction,' when you don't have a family experience you can turn back to, and you don't have an inner direction yet." (Holt et al., 2017, p. 18)

About 30 students comprised each section of the seminar, with the number of first-generation sections increasing annually. Missouri State University data showed that retention rates for students who participated in these special GEP sections increased to about 79% (as of the 2015-2016 academic year), such that these students reached higher retention rates than other GEP sections. Further, a group of students from one of the first-generation GEP sections created an on-campus group called "MSU: I'm First." In this group, students supported one another by connecting each other to scholarship resources, providing essay writing assistance, and discussing how to best share their college experiences with friends and family at home, thus building academic and social integration on campus for first-generation students and expanding their learning community and support network.

At SEMO, integration of the Academic Support Center with TRIO Student Support Services ensured that first-generation students had a "home base" on campus, a one-stop-shop for advice and connection to resources, including academic support, FAFSA assistance, financial literacy, and college success programs. This First-Generation Targeted Support Initiative provided tailored student support based on a student's GPA and academic performance, so students received the help they needed, rather than a set package of services. Depending on GPA, students met with an advisor on a weekly, bi-weekly, or less frequent basis, thereby establishing an ongoing relationship with an advisor in the Academic Support Center.

At UCM, the customization of support services to each student was undergirded by a data dashboard shared across departments that included both academic and behavioral indicators highlighting students who may have needed extra assistance. The dashboard allowed staff and faculty to see who was working with a student to ensure coordinated support rather than confusing and off-putting duplication of efforts. Demographic data, including first-generation status, were part of the dashboard, allowing staff and faculty working with students to direct students to relevant services.

Cross-silo use of data to support students on campus was considered both daunting and essential by the institutional representatives interviewed in the Holt et al. (2017) study. As a result, several Missouri institutions, in an effort to better understand the UCM model, chose to participate in a series of professional learning workshops in which institutions shared what worked in supporting underrepresented students (described later in this article).

## Early College Experiences

As noted previously, SBPs and first-year programs can reduce "summer melt" and smooth the academic transition for first-generation students, leading to several positive outcomes, including more college knowledge, higher academic self-efficacy, better campus integration, and, in some cases, significantly increased retention rates. Webster University's Transitions and Academic Prep (TAP) program was one such SBP designed to help conditionally admitted students adjust to campus life. Through TAP, students earned two credits at no cost while they lived on campus and participated in a 10-day program centering on writing and study skills, time management, and financial literacy. On average, 51% of TAP students were first-generation, and, notably, retention rates reached levels higher than those of the student population overall (85% vs. 79%) as of fall 2016. Transition and Academic Prep support extended through the first semester, and Webster University, at the time of Holt et al.'s (2017) study, was considering extending it further to provide students ongoing support because of its success. One Webster University student noted:

> "I did the whole summer program and I really, really liked it….I'm a bio major, and we all know biology is hard. I got a chance to meet the professors first in the summer and talk to them about it was going to be, what should I expect in the classes, so that was really nice." (Holt et al., 2017, p. 22).

Some orientation programs were tailored to first-generation and low-income students. For instance, in SEMO's two-day Academic Support Center Transition Camp, students connected to important college resources and learned about college expectations. Focus-group students reported that this aided their successful transition, especially learning about college expectations and guidelines.

## Tutoring and Mentoring

As previous research has indicated, both tutoring and mentoring, particularly when engaging peers, can be effective tools for increasing academic outcomes, such as college grades and credits completed (Colver & Fry, 2016; Leidenfrost et al., 2014; Vick et al., 2015) and college retention and completion

(Chaney, 2010), as well as improving motivation, self-esteem, and other non-cognitive outcomes (Greenwood et al., 1990; Topping, 1996; Zevallos & Washburn, 2014).

Peer tutoring and mentoring programs were prominent at the five universities that ranked highest based on Holt et al.'s (2017) success formula. First-generation students praised the availability of free tutoring services in most any subject, on short notice, and indicated this was essential to their college success. At Maryville University, sophomore students mentored freshmen in the Multicultural Scholars program, which sought to create inclusive leaders. Many peer mentors continued mentoring after the sophomore year, although it was not required. Retention rates for students in the program ranged from 83% to 100% between 2010 and 2016, and the program received an Innovative Program Award in 2016-2017 (Holt et al., 2017).

Important to first-generation students was the availability of assistance as needed, which may not have been during traditional office hours. Students at UCM commented on the importance of residence-hall-based academic resource coaches who stayed in touch with students and connected them to resources as needed. Another example of 24/7 assistance was a relatively new approach at Maryville University that used life coaches who provided students with personalized advisement based on data about students' learning styles and strengths. These around-the-clock models went beyond traditional advising to provide social and emotional support and a sense of "family" for first-generation students.

Faculty and staff also served as effective mentors at the five highest ranked institutions (Holt et al., 2017). The Webster University TAP program engaged faculty in providing early college support to provisionally admitted students. At SEMO, the Academic Support Center's Academic Mentoring Program (AMP) connected students with faculty in their field of study who then served as their mentors. Interestingly, the students mentored through the AMP program were employed for 12 hours per week by their faculty mentors, with the salary paid jointly by the Educational Access Program at SEMO and the faculty member's department. Students who participated in AMP had a five-year graduation rate of 95%. As one SEMO student stated,

> "It gets you a job on campus with your mentor as well as just a mentor that you can go and talk to. I know I wore my mentor out with advice about, not just academics, but everything in life." (Holt et al., 2017, p. 46)

## Limitations

The analysis and observation of the strategies that were successful at these five institutions were based on interviews with a limited number of administrators and students, and the students were solicited by university personnel, potentially narrowing the subject pool and their viewpoints. However, student participants were all first-generation minority students and/or low-income students, and interviews reached saturation on the major themes.

Additionally, at-risk students were often involved in several student support services, making it difficult to determine the effects of one particular practice. In this study, we focused on identifying successful institutions, then investigated the practices that administrators and students identified as contributors to the institutional outcomes. This approach helped us target practices that specifically benefited our populations of interest and was not intended to represent all of the academic and student services programs at an institution.

First-generation status has considerable overlap with low-income and minority students (Redford & Mulvaney Hoyer, 2017), who have their own prior history and knowledge bases, as well as challenges they bring to the higher education environment. It is unclear whether first-generation practices may need to be different for different minority groups or those who are low-income as well.

Our institution interview sample was limited to those institutions previously named that were the five highest ranked in supporting underrepresented students according to Holt et al. (2017). Of these five, three were public universities and two were nonprofit universities; none of the institutions was for-profit, and therefore the findings cannot be generalized to for-profit colleges or universities.

Finally, though this article focused intentionally on non-financial policies and practices, we recognize that for many low-income first-generation students, college affordability is a determining factor, if not the driving factor, in college persistence. Given the substantial research on financial factors of success, we chose to emphasize non-financial factors in this study; however, this approach may minimize the importance of financial support for a large number of first-generation students.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

The practices employed by the Missouri institutions noted here are models that can be replicated on other campuses. That is the thinking behind the creation of the Student Success Learning Institute (SSLI), which seeks to foster replication of effective institutional practice through shared insight and lessons learned. Launched in February 2018, the SSLI has a secondary goal of forming a peer network of professionals who provide student support services on campuses across Missouri, opening communication among those who support a student population that may transfer from one institution to another and who could benefit from coordinated support. The SSLI, which exists to inform institutional practice, is managed by an external community organization, St. Louis Graduates, and seeks to elevate and advance strategies that emerged in the Holt et al. (2017) report to a network of local higher education institutions, with the goal of eliminating equity gaps. Such community organizations can play a critical role as neutral brokers in bringing together higher education leaders, policymakers, business leader, and community leaders in support of students.

In addition to the SSLI, Missouri State University has launched a biennial First-Generation Students Conference bringing together higher education leaders from campuses across the state to specifically discuss opportunities for increasing support for first-generation students. One of the topics at the inaugural conference in 2017 focused on the higher transfer rates among first-generation students. As Radunzel (2018) noted, first-generation students attending a four-year institution were more likely than their non-first-generation peers to drop out or transfer to another institution in year two. These first-generation students were 16% more likely to reverse transfer to a two-year institution than students whose parents had earned a bachelor's degree, despite a stated interest in earning a bachelor's degree. In addition, first-generation students enrolling at a two-year institution had a decreased likelihood of vertically transferring to a four-year institution. These findings reinforce the importance of proactive advising for first-generation students to guide their academic and school engagement decision making so they continue to persist, and suggest that cross-institutional articulation agreements that support transfer students would increase the likelihood of these students persisting toward completion. Further, state policies like Missouri's new Core 42 initiative, which establishes a common core transfer curriculum and aligned course numbers across public institutions, should be effective in assisting first-generation students in persisting even if they transfer.

A critical issue related to first-generation support services and the kinds of practices discussed in Holt et al. (2017) is the availability of financial resources to implement these services and practices, coupled with institutional leadership committed to underrepresented student success. Since the publication of Holt et al.

some of the highlighted programs have been discontinued. Notably, the academic resource coaches in the residence halls at UCM, lauded in Holt et al. and celebrated at the Student Success Learning Institute in February 2018, are no longer part of the student support mix due in large part to financial constraints stemming from state budget cuts to higher education. Public institutions across the United States face similar challenges as state budgets increasingly struggle to fund higher education through general revenue sources. In the case of UCM, budget cuts were the impetus for innovative thinking, and students now receive proactive advising tied to their majors. However, year-after-year cuts to higher education budgets in Missouri and other states are eroding the ability of institutions to provide the very supports demonstrated effective for underrepresented students. This highlights the importance of institutional commitment to student success and the need to foster a campus-wide mindset of prioritizing student supports, particularly by those who lead institutional financial decision making and fund development.

The commitment of institutional leadership is another essential component of underrepresented student success noted in Holt et al. (2017). University presidents set the direction of their campuses, and those who engage with students formally and informally contribute to an inclusive campus culture. Students in the Holt et al. focus groups were generally very aware and proud of their presidents and campus leaders and their ability to relate to the students. Institutional leaders also set institutional policy, including directing financial aid dollars to prioritize need-based aid or multicultural scholarships that support underrepresented students, although, as noted here, the availability of resources varies between public and private institutions.

Finally, while Holt et al. (2017) included the perspectives of students supported through the practices identified, more remains to be done to bridge the gap between student-informed programs and student-led policy change. As first-generation students acclimate to college life and join initiatives like “MSU: I’m First,” there is an opportunity for institutions to engage them in shaping the programs and policies designed for students like them. Coalitions such as the Active Advocacy Coalition, a network of college students across Missouri advocating for greater college affordability and expanded access for underrepresented students, are informing state policy through student-led research on equity in the awarding of state-funded financial aid programs (Addo, 2016).

**Implications for Scholarship**

As noted by previous researchers, there is abundant information about first-generation students from national studies that provide outcome data; however, smaller scale studies are needed to understand and describe the strategies and practices that can move the needle on retention and completion for first-generation students (Pike & Kuh, 2005). This study highlights practices aligned with current theories of college success models for first-generation students and provides examples of how these practices were employed successfully at some Missouri campuses. Yet, this nascent body of research on success strategies and practices for first-generation students needs further study. Radunzel (2018) showed some of the impacts of first-generation student characteristics (e.g., academic self-concept, on- or off-campus residence; educational aspirations, college readiness) on dropout or transfer, but further study is warranted to understand implications of the institutional environment (e.g., public, nonprofit private, or for-profit private; urban or rural) and type of support service (e.g., home-based programs, tutoring and mentoring, SBPs, and first-year programming). The work of Holt et al. (2017) suggests the importance of proactive advising, summer bridge programs, and early alerts, but further research is warranted to understand how to provide the most effective support services for all first-generation college students.

More experimental and quasi-experimental studies are needed to further test and provide credible evidence of the effectiveness of existing practices for supporting first-generation students. In instances in which these methods have been used, much value has been added to the field. In one notable example, MDRC's evaluation of the CUNY system's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs using randomized controlled trials provided strong evidence that a combination of support services helped to double community college graduation rates, subsequently leading to the expansion of this multi-faceted program (Scrivener et al., 2015).

The 2018 Strada-Gallup Survey highlighted the importance of mentor-mentee relationships for college students, particularly with faculty, but pointed out that only a quarter of all college graduates report having had such a mentor on campus. Further, first-generation college students are five percentage points less likely to have a faculty member as a mentor. We speculate that students seek mentors with whom they share commonalities, indicating the importance of universities hiring faculty and student support staff who have first-hand experiences that reflect the students attending the institution; however, further scholarship is needed on establishing successful mentoring relationships for first-generation students.

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# The First-Year Seminar: A Program Evaluation of Students' Public-Affairs Awareness

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## Abstract

Similar to the public-welfare aim of many universities, Missouri State University (MSU) was granted a specific statewide public affairs mission in 1995 comprising three pillars: community engagement, cultural competence, and ethical leadership. Since the implementation of this mission, the university has engaged in various efforts to promote and foster public-affairs awareness among students, including through its first-year seminar (FYS). This article details a study conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the FYS in enhancing students' public-affairs awareness. The researchers solicited input from students in the first and last weeks of their first semester at MSU using the Public Affairs Scale–Short Survey (PAS-SS) as well as other questions. The study sample consisted of 540 students who completed both the pre- and post-surveys. The researchers found that students' public-affairs awareness in the cultural competence domain increased during the FYS program, but not in community engagement or ethical leadership. Additionally, there were significant differences in public-affairs awareness over time between first-generation students enrolled in specialized sections and those who were not. No significant differences were found in public-affairs awareness between faculty- and staff-taught sections or between sections with a peer leader and those without. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the study findings and a consideration of implications for future practice.


*Keywords:* public affairs, civic engagement, first-year seminar, program evaluation

The first-year seminar (FYS) has become a popular means to help students transition to college and succeed academically. However, many higher education institutions have expressed concerns about the effectiveness of their FYS programs, prompting researchers to study their overall success. For instance, Permzadian and Crede (2016) reviewed 195 studies involving over 150,000 students and found that first-year seminars tend to have small average effects on grades ($\delta$ = .02) and retention ($\delta$ = .11); yet, these effects are meaningful in that even small changes in college success and retention can have significant financial impacts on both institutions and the communities they serve. Universities also often imbue their first-year seminars with local nuances to reflect the mission and "flavor" of their respective campus environments. More recently, higher education institutions have placed greater emphasis on civic engagement—including the importance of appreciating diversity, developing a sense of social responsibility, and leading by example—as a core value to be cultivated in students (Jacoby, 2009).

## Missouri State University's Public-Affairs Mission

Founded in 1905, Missouri State University (MSU) is a Carnegie-classified public, four-year, comprehensive, residential, selective-admissions institution; in 2010, MSU also received the Carnegie Foundation's elective Classification for Community Engagement. The university is located in Springfield, the state's third largest city, and enrolls approximately 24,000 students. Expanding upon its mission "to develop educated persons," MSU received a public-affairs designation in 1995, making a commitment to prepare students to heighten their cultural competence, engage with their communities, and become ethical leaders. (While some higher education institutions may use the term *civic engagement*, MSU envelops civic engagement within the concept of public affairs.) Each year, the university decides upon a public-affairs theme, which is then promoted during annual signature events, including its public-affairs conference, and through the selection of a common reader for the first-year seminar.

The university's public-affairs mission comprises three pillars: ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement. The goal of ethical leadership is for students to articulate their values, act ethically in a democracy, and engage in principled leadership. The goal of cultural competence is for students to recognize and respect multiple perspectives and cultures. Finally, the goal of community engagement is for students to recognize the importance of their contribution and that of scientific principles to sound public policy and to society more broadly (MSU, 2018a). The university strives to fulfill its public-affairs mission through various means, among the most important of which is the first-year seminar.

## First-Year Seminar and Public Affairs

Previous research has provided only limited evidence of the association between first-year seminars and increases in students' civic learning, suggesting a gap in the literature. For example, in their mixed-methods study, Schamber and Mahoney's (2008) found that when a first-year seminar included a short-term service-learning component (as occurs at MSU), students showed significant gains in their political awareness (i.e., knowledge of local and national politics) and social-justice attitudes (i.e., awareness of institutions' role in determining individuals' fates). However, the effects were small ($d = .11$, $d = .33$, respectively), which was further supported by qualitative evidence. The study also explored students' motivation for civic action (i.e., plans for future community involvement), but the findings were inconsistent, resulting in an unclear picture of the extent to which student motivation was affected by the intervention. Similarly, Troxel and Cutright (2008), in their case studies of Georgia State University, Millersville University, and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, reported on how these three institutions have attempted to integrate civic learning into their first-year seminars, but they provided little quantitative evidence related to program evaluation.

At Missouri State University, the FYS is required of all incoming, first-time students who have fewer than 24 hours of postsecondary experience or who are not enrolled in Honors College (Honors College students take a topic-specific, two-credit-hour course, which has different goals and objectives). Civic engagement is central to the FYS; as part of the general education curriculum, this two-credit-hour, semester-long course has three objectives: (a) to heighten students' academic skills; (b) to introduce students to MSU's public-affairs mission, with equal emphasis given to each of its three pillars; and (c) to foster students' awareness of campus resources and establish connections with its community members. To help promote public-affairs awareness, all sections of the FYS are required to utilize the annually selected common reader. With input from faculty, student affairs, community library, and student representatives, the common reader is selected via a campus-wide and communitywide nomination process. The common reader selection committee reviews nominations and selects the book that encompasses all aspects of the university's public-affairs mission. For the 2017-2018 academic year (during which this study took place), the common reader was Will Allen's (2013) *The Good Food Revolution,* tied to MSU's theme of "Sustainability in Practice: Consensus and Consequences." This book served not only as a scholarly introduction to the theme for the academic community, but also allowed students to conduct a deeper critical analysis of the public-affairs mission and to make connections among the reader, the mission, interdisciplinary coursework, students' academic major, and their communities (MSU, 2018b). The common reader curriculum committee develops discussion questions, quizzes, and activities that are then shared with the instructors to utilize in the FYS. While no specific assessment is conducted across all sections of the course, instructors of every section are required to assign the entire book and to assess student learning related to it.

The instructional requirements for teaching the first-year seminar include a master's degree and current affiliation with the university, giving faculty and staff from various divisions an opportunity to teach the course. All instructors participate in an annual professional development workshop. Additionally, some FYS sections are assigned a peer leader who serves as a resource for the partnering instructor and for students. Peer leaders are sophomores, juniors, and seniors who are selected from a competitive application process and have a desire to help first-year students as they transition to university life. Partnering with an instructor, peer leaders attend every FYS session and take a peer-leadership class (MSU, 2018b). The participation of peer leaders in the FYS program is supported by the literature, which has highlighted the benefits of peer-leader programs in facilitating students' personal development, academic success, satisfaction, and persistence (e.g., Shook & Keup, 2012). What remains to be explored in future research, however, is whether—and to what extent—peer leaders facilitate civic engagement and learning outcomes.

Since Missouri State University's population of first-generation students is slightly higher than the national average (34% compared to 30%), and since the retention rate of first-generation students is 8% to 10% lower than that of continuing-generation students (MSU, 2018c), faculty and staff decided in fall 2014 to implement some specialized FYS sections as a way to better support this population. These specialized sections were offered to first-generation students grouped by college (referred to as "college-dedicated") but also included sections for undeclared, first-generation students. The literature supports the implementation of programs designed to address unique first-generation student needs toward improving academic outcomes (e.g., Pike & Kuh, 2005; Vaughan, Parra, & Lalonde, 2014; Woosely & Shepler, 2011). In the case of peer-leader programs, however, it is not clear whether and to what extent specialized programming would also improve civic engagement among first-generation students.

## Study Purpose

Program evaluations provide an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of a program (McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorn, 2013). The results of an evaluation may generate suggestions for improving a program, thereby helping to ensure that it meets its intended outcomes (McDavid et al., 2013). The primary aim of this study was to conduct a program evaluation of the first-year seminar at Missouri State University, specifically as it relates to the development of public-affairs awareness. A secondary aim of this study was to assess the efficacy of the components of the FYS program (i.e., specialized sections, peer-leader sections, faculty/staff-taught sections) in facilitating public-affairs awareness among students.

The study was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- RQ1: Does the FYS program at MSU produce gains in public-affairs awareness, conceptualized in terms of ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement?
- RQ2: Are there differences in public-affairs awareness gains between first-generation students in specialized sections and those in non-specialized sections?
- RQ3: Are there differences in public-affairs awareness gains between peer-leader sections and non-peer leader sections?
- RQ4: Are there differences in public-affairs awareness gains between staff-taught sections and faculty-taught sections?

## Method

### Procedures

After obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board, participants were recruited through instructors of FYS courses at Missouri State University. Recruitment emails were sent to 83 instructors (nine of whom taught multiple sections) on August 8, 2017, prior to the start of the fall semester, asking for permission to survey students at the beginning and end of the semester. The link to the pre-survey was sent on August 14 to the 74 instructors who agreed to participate. On the first day of class (August 21), reminder emails were sent to the 74 instructors who agreed to participate. A link to the post-survey was sent on November 17 to the 73 instructors whose students participated in the study; a reminder was sent on December 4.

The survey for the study was built and administered using Qualtrics online survey software. The survey included the items from the Public Affairs Scale–Short Survey (PAS-SS) (Levesque-Bristol & Richards, 2014) as well as questions pertaining to ethical leadership, university involvement, peer-leader interactions, and advisor roles along with a demographics questionnaire. After participants gave their informed consent, they were directed to the 42-item online survey. The "request response" function in Qualtrics minimized inadvertent item nonresponse, and three attention-check items were also included to identify inattentive and random response patterns.

### Participants

G*Power was used to conduct an a priori power analysis, specifying an effect size of $f = 0.25$, an alpha level of 0.05, and a power of 0.95 to determine the needed sample size (Faul, Erdfeld, Lang, & Buchner, 2007). The analysis showed that a sample size of 251 would be required to reveal a statistically significant effect for the study. After data screening 687 potential participants with matched pre-post survey scores (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), a sample of 540 individuals was included in the study. The sample consisted of 29.3% men, 70.4% women, and 0.4% "other." The age of participants ranged from 18 to 53 years, with a mean age of 18.6 (*SD* = 2.40). The majority of the participants reported being White (89.1%). Fifty-eight percent of the participants indicated that their parents' combined annual income was greater than $70,000, and 31.5% reported being employed. Approximately 40.4% identified as a first-generation college student, defined as a student whose parents did not graduate from college (see Table 1 for complete demographic characteristics). The sample overrepresented female and first-generation students.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics*

| **Characteristic** | ***N* = 540** | |
|---|---|---|
| | ***n*** | **%** |
| **Gender** | | |
| Man | 158 | 29.3 |
| Woman | 380 | 70.4 |
| Other | 2 | 0.4 |
| **Ethnicity/Race** | | |
| White | 481 | 89.1 |
| Black | 26 | 4.8 |
| American Indian/Alaska Native | 4 | 0.7 |
| Asian | 9 | 1.7 |
| Other | 20 | 3.7 |
| **First Generation College Student Status** | | |
| First-Generation College Student | 218 | 40.4 |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Non-First Generation College Student | 322 | 59.6 |
| **Employment Status** | | |
| Unemployed | 370 | 68.5 |
| Work 1-10 hours a week | 75 | 13.9 |
| Work 11-20 hours a week | 60 | 11.1 |
| Work 21-34 hours a week | 26 | 4.8 |
| Work more than 35 hours a week | 9 | 1.7 |
| **Parental Annual Income** | | |
| $0 | 10 | 1.9 |
| Less than $10,000 | 15 | 2.8 |
| $10,000 - $19,999 | 23 | 4.3 |
| $20,000 - $29,999 | 22 | 4.1 |
| $30,000 - $39,999 | 31 | 5.7 |
| $40,000 - $49,999 | 34 | 6.3 |
| 50,000 - $59,999 | 49 | 9.1 |
| $60,000 - $69,999 | 42 | 7.8 |
| $70,000 - $79,999 | 47 | 8.7 |
| $80,000 - $89,999 | 45 | 8.3 |
| $90,000 - $99,999 | 59 | 10.9 |
| $100,000 - $149,999 | 109 | 20.2 |
| More than $150,000 | 54 | 10.0 |

## Measures

The Public Affairs Scale–Short Survey is a modified version of the original Public Affairs Scale (PAS) (Levesque-Bristol & Cornelius-White, 2012). The PAS-SS is a self-report measure consisting of 15 items assessing civic learning and engagement within three dimensions: community engagement (five items), cultural competence (five items), and ethical leadership (five items). The community engagement subscale assesses students' ability to recognize and meet community needs (e.g., "I am confident that I will participate in community service activities in the future"). The cultural competence subscale measures students' cultural self-awareness, knowledge, and skills for engaging with individuals from other cultures (e.g., "I am able to communicate effectively with people from different cultures"). The ethical leadership subscale assesses the development of students' moral and ethical awareness as well as excellence and integrity as they lead and serve others (e.g., "When working in groups, I assure everyone's voice is heard before a decision is reached"). Items in this measure are rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"), with higher scores indicating greater levels of the three dimensions of civic learning and engagement. Internal consistency of PAS-SS scores was supported by Levesque-Bristol and Richards (2014) in a sample of largely college seniors (community engagement $\alpha = 0.84$; cultural competence $\alpha = 0.76$; ethical leadership $\alpha = 0.81$) as well as in the current sample (community engagement $\alpha = 0.87$; cultural competence $\alpha = 0.65$; ethical leadership $\alpha = 0.68$). The scale revision study reported evidence of construct validity in the forms of factor analysis and correlations in the expected direction between the PAS-SS and two measures of similar constructs (see Levesque-Bristol & Richards, 2014). The participants also completed a demographics questionnaire.

## Results

SPSS (version 22.0) was used for data screening, an assumptions check, and the main analyses. Following standard procedures for data screening for inferential statistics (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007), the researchers checked assumptions for MANOVA. The assumptions check revealed univariate outliers for items on the PAS-SS, which were excluded from the analyses. The data also violated normality; however, given that MANOVA is robust against violations of assumptions when there is an adequate sample size ($N = 540$), it was determined that this analysis was appropriate for this study.

### Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

An examination of the descriptive statistics for the three factors of the PAS-SS—community engagement, cultural competence, and ethnical leadership—indicated that, overall, participants rated all three factors high at well above the midpoint of the factor score of 15 (see Table 2). Additionally, ethical leadership was consistently rated highest of the three factors in all subgroups, suggesting that participants held a high subjective view of themselves as ethical leaders. Notably, while cultural competence and ethical leadership scores increased over time in all groups, community engagement scores decreased over time in some groups. Table 2 provides the pre and post PAS-SS factor score means and standard deviations for the overall sample as well as for the subgroups used in the study.

Table 2

*Pre/Post PAS-SS Factor Score Means and SD by Group*

| | **Pre-Test** | | **Post-Test** | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | ***Mean*** | ***SD*** | ***Mean*** | ***SD*** | ***n*** |
| **Overall** | | | | | 540 |
| Community Engagement | 21.79 | 2.74 | 21.74 | 2.79 | |
| Cultural Competence | 20.19 | 2.69 | 20.81 | 2.54 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.49 | 1.74 | 22.56 | 1.80 | |
| **Peer Leader Sections** | | | | | 209 |
| Community Engagement | 21.59 | 2.80 | 21.50 | 2.77 | |
| Cultural Competence | 20.28 | 2.61 | 20.96 | 2.40 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.44 | 1.76 | 22.58 | 1.72 | |
| **No Peer Leader Sections** | | | | | 229 |
| Community Engagement | 21.93 | 2.72 | 22.05 | 2.80 | |
| Cultural Competence | 20.07 | 2.71 | 20.84 | 2.55 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.50 | 1.77 | 22.57 | 1.84 | |
| **Specialized Sections** | | | | | 84 |
| Community Engagement | 21.87 | 2.67 | 21.68 | 2.82 | |
| Cultural Competence | 19.54 | 2.46 | 20.89 | 2.50 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.30 | 1.81 | 22.43 | 1.90 | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Non-Specialized Sections** | | | | | 101 |
| Community Engagement | 21.85 | 2.80 | 21.97 | 2.67 | |
| Cultural Competence | 20.92 | 2.49 | 21.25 | 2.48 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.71 | 1.82 | 22.74 | 1.72 | |
| **Faculty-Taught Sections** | | | | | 187 |
| Community Engagement | 21.74 | 2.65 | 21.59 | 2.78 | |
| Cultural Competence | 19.99 | 2.77 | 20.84 | 2.41 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.56 | 1.69 | 22.66 | 1.72 | |
| **Staff-Taught Sections** | | | | | 251 |
| Community Engagement | 21.78 | 2.85 | 21.94 | 2.80 | |
| Cultural Competence | 20.30 | 2.58 | 20.93 | 2.53 | |
| Ethical Leadership | 22.40 | 1.82 | 22.51 | 1.82 | |

## Evaluation of FYS in Relation to Public-Affairs Awareness

A repeated measures MANOVA was conducted to answer RQ1 ("Does the FYS program at MSU produce gains in public-affairs awareness, conceptualized in terms of ethical leadership, cultural competence, and community engagement?"). The analysis was conducted on the entire sample ($N = 540$) with the three PAS-SS factors (community engagement, cultural competence, and ethical leadership) as the dependent variables in the analysis. The results showed that there was a significant difference in public-affairs awareness over time ($F(3, 537) = 13.10$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .068$). Univariate tests further indicated that the FYS course had a significant effect on cultural competence ($F(1, 539) = 37.09$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .064$) but not on community engagement ($F(1, 539) = .16$, $p = .687$, partial $\eta^2 = .0003$) or ethical leadership ($F(1, 539) = .86$, $p = .353$, partial $\eta^2 = .002$). Overall, the mean cultural competence scores increased from 20.19 ($SD = 2.69$) before to 20.81 ($SD = 2.54$) after taking the FYS course.

## Evaluation of Specialized Sections

The program evaluation included students in FYS from both 42 general and 16 specialized sections that cater to students within a particular college and who self-identify as first-generation. For this subgroup analysis (as well as the following two), students in the nine sections taught by graduate teaching assistants were removed since the latter are not faculty or staff, are not involved with specialized first-generation sections or college-specific sections, and do not use peer leaders. A two-way mixed-design MANOVA was conducted to answer RQ2 ("Are there differences in public-affairs awareness gains between first-generation students in specialized sections and those in non-specialized sections?"). In this analysis, first-generation students in specialized sections ($n$ = 84) were compared to first-generation students in non-specialized sections ($n$ = 101) in relation to the three PAS-SS factors. Results showed a significant interaction effect, indicating a difference between the specialized and non-specialized sections in public-affairs awareness over time ($F(3, 181) = 3.16$, $p = .026$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$). Univariate tests indicated specifically that the specialized sections had a significant effect on cultural competence over time ($F(1, 183) = 8.29$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .043$) but not on community engagement ($F(1, 183) = .68$, $p = .410$, partial $\eta^2 = .004$) or ethical leadership ($F(1, 183) = .12$, $p = .725$, partial $\eta^2 = .001$). The mean cultural competence scores increased from 19.54 ($SD$ = 2.46) to 20.89 ($SD$ = 2.50) in the specialized sections and from 20.92 ($SD$ = 2.49) to 21.25 ($SD$ = 2.48) in the non-specialized sections. There were also significant main effects of time and specialized sections (see Table 3 for all results of multivariate tests and Table 4 for all results of univariate tests).

Table 3

*Multivariate Tests for First-Generation Specialized vs. Non-Specialized Sections (N = 185)*

| **Effect** | $\Lambda$ | $F$ | $df_1$ | $df_2$ | $p$ | ***Partial*** $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Specialized Section | 0.95 | 3.12 | 3 | 181 | 0.027 | 0.049 |
| Time | 0.89 | 7.45 | 3 | 181 | < 0.001 | 0.110 |
| Section*Time | 0.95 | 3.16 | 3 | 181 | 0.026 | 0.050 |

Table 4

*Univariate Tests First-Generation Specialized vs. Non-Specialized Sections (N = 185)*

| **Effect** | **Measure** | ***MS*** | ***F*** | $df_1$ | $df_2$ | $p$ | ***Partial*** $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Specialized Section | Community Engagement | 1.72 | 0.15 | 1 | 183 | 0.703 | 0.001 |
| | Cultural Competence | 69.40 | 7.39 | 1 | 183 | 0.007 | 0.039 |
| | Ethical Leadership | 12.19 | | 1 | 183 | 0.107 | 0.014 |
| Time | Community Engagement | 0.12 | 0.04 | 1 | 183 | 0.849 | 0.000 |
| | Cultural Competence | 65.02 | 22.13 | 1 | 183 | <0.001 | 0.108 |
| | Ethical Leadership | 0.59 | 0.31 | 1 | 183 | 0.577 | 0.002 |
| Section*Time | Community Engagement | 2.19 | 0.68 | 1 | 183 | 0.41 | 0.004 |
| | Cultural Competence | 24.35 | 8.29 | 1 | 183 | 0.004 | 0.043 |
| | Ethical Leadership | 0.24 | 0.12 | 1 | 183 | 0.725 | 0.001 |

## Evaluations of Sections with a Peer Leader

The evaluation of the FYS included 41 sections with a peer leader and 55 sections without a peer leader. Instructors are invited to indicate whether they would prefer to teach the course with or without a peer leader, and most instructors who prefer a peer leader are matched with one. The researchers used a two-way mixed-design MANOVA to answer RQ3 ("Are there differences in public-affairs awareness gains between peer-leader sections and non-peer leader sections?"). In this analysis, participants in sections with a peer leader ($n$ = 209) were compared to participants in sections without a peer leader ($n$ = 229) relative to community engagement, cultural competence, and ethical leadership. The results revealed no significant differences between sections with a peer leader and sections without a peer leader relative to public-affairs awareness over time ($F(3, 434) = 0.43$, $p = .733$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$). Results indicated a main effect of time on cultural competence ($F(1, 436) = 43.77$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .091$) but not on community engagement ($F(1, 436) = .03$, $p = .871$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$) or ethical leadership ($F(1, 436) = 1.49$, $p = .223$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$), with the mean cultural competence scores increasing from 20.17 ($SD = 2.67$) before to 20.89 ($SD = 2.48$) after taking the FYS.

**Evaluations of Sections taught by Faculty versus Staff**

The FYS comprised 38 sections taught by faculty and 49 sections taught by university staff. The researchers used a two-way mixed-design MANOVA to answer RQ4 ("Are there differences in public-affairs awareness gains between staff-taught sections and faculty-taught sections?"). In this analysis, participants in sections taught by staff ($n = 251$) were compared to participants in sections taught by faculty ($n = 187$) in relation to the three PAS-SS factors. The results showed no significant differences between staff- and faculty-taught sections regarding public-affairs awareness over time, ($F(3, 434) = 0.98$, $p = .401$, partial $\eta^2 = .007$). As with previous analyses, results indicated a main effect of time on cultural competence ($F(1, 436) = 45.21$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .094$) but not on community engagement ($F(1, 436) = .001$, $p = .982$, partial $\eta^2 < .001$) or ethical leadership ($F(1, 436) = 1.39$, $p = .240$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$), with the mean cultural competence scores increasing from 20.17 ($SD = 2.67$) to 20.89 ($SD = 2.48$) before and after taking the course.

**Discussion**

Overall, the first-year seminar program showed a moderate positive effect for public-affairs awareness overall and in cultural competence specifically (equivalent to $d = .54$, $d = .52$, respectively), suggesting that FYS at Missouri State University is effective in fostering public-affairs awareness in students. This effect is larger than the typical effects of FYS on grades and retention, as shown in Permzadian and Crede's (2016) meta-analysis. At the same time, the results of the present study suggest that there are no significant differences in public-affairs awareness gains over time between sections with or without a peer leader and sections taught by faculty or staff. Although the findings concerning peer leaders were somewhat unexpected given the benefits of peer-leader programs highlighted in the literature (e.g., Shook & Keup, 2012), the positive effects of peer leaders may be limited to areas of academic achievement, student satisfaction and adaptation to college, and retention, and do not extend to the development of public-affairs awareness. Also, sections without a peer leader might be no less effective because the instructor has chosen intentionally not to have a peer leader, suggesting that the program's policy to only provide peer leaders when preferred is sensible. Moreover, the lack of evidence for differences between faculty-taught and staff-taught sections regarding public-affairs development supports the continued recruitment of a diverse set of FYS instructors from both staff and faculty to teach the course since findings indicated that public-affairs awareness is fostered as a result of taking the course and does not depend upon who teaches it.

Notably, there was a moderate effect over time on public-affairs awareness overall and on cultural competence specifically for first-generation students taught in specialized sections compared to those in general sections. In other words, the specialized sections were effective in producing gains in public-affairs awareness overall and in cultural competence in particular (but not in ethical leadership and community engagement) for first-generation students. This finding suggests that first-generation students do benefit from specialized sections that provide college-specific instructors and additional support and resources tailored to their needs. Given these findings, further expansion of the specialized sections seems warranted.

By contrast, changes in the community engagement and ethical leadership aspects of public-affairs awareness were not significant at all levels of analyses. The lack of evidence that the FYS fosters the development of community engagement is consistent with the inconclusive findings from Schamber and Mahoney's (2008) research concerning students' future plans for community involvement (described earlier). The PAS-SS may not be sensitive enough to assess change in community engagement or ethical leadership or that these two qualities are perceived by students differently at the beginning and end of the course.

**Limitations**

While the participant pool of 540 students from sections taught by 73 instructors is large, it still only represented a sample of the 2,995 students taught by a total of 83 instructors across all sections of the program. It is possible that the students taught by these instructors or those who self-selected to participate in the study were inherently different from the group as a whole. Likewise, while some sections had high participation rates, others did not, which suggests that bias was introduced at the student level.

Moreover, the PAS-SS is limited in its reliability and validity because it assesses public-affairs awareness as conceptualized by the university's public-affairs mission, which is somewhat different from the exact conceptualization used in the current FYS course goals and objectives. In other words, while the PAS-SS was designed to measure Missouri State University's public-affairs mission, it does not measure the precise conceptualization of the mission utilized in the course. Additionally, the reliability of PAS-SS scores in the current sample was generally lower than in previous studies, though still marginally adequate, suggesting that errors in instrumentation may account for the lack of evidence of larger effects.

Furthermore, it is possible that student participants did not fully understand the concepts asked about in the PAS-SS, especially the concept of ethical leadership, anecdotal reports of which support the findings in this study. Specifically, instructors have reported for years that, at the start of the course, students think they are strong leaders, but upon learning more about what ethical leadership encompasses during the course, they come to appreciate their shortcomings, and therefore their self-perceptions as leaders do not necessarily increase. In this way, it is possible that their awareness of ethical leadership actually improves due to a more accurate and informed understanding of the concept, but that the PAS-SS simply lacks sensitivity to capture this nuanced change over time. Another limitation relates to the lack of open-ended questions in the study, which, if included, may have helped yield unexpected results.

## Conclusion and Implications for Practice and Research

Based on the current evaluation study, the FYS program at Missouri State University appears successful in producing gains in public-affairs awareness among students, particularly in relation to the cultural competence component. Likewise, the specialized sections for first-generation students in the various colleges appear to help first-generation students develop elements of civic learning at a rate greater than when they are integrated in non-specialized sections. Thus, continuing to route first-generation students into an expanding number of specialized sections seems warranted. As no differences were found in public-affairs development between sections taught by faculty and staff or in sections with or without a peer leader, there is no finding that supports altering these practices and variations according to availability and choice. As research on FYS programs' small but important effects on academic achievement and retention is robust (e.g., Permzadian & Crede, 2016), but nascent for public-affairs outcomes, further research is encouraged, as also indicated by the results of this study.

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# The Impact of Wyman's Teen Leadership Program on College Achievement and Retention

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**Abstract**

Low-income, first-generation college students face a host of obstacles on their journeys toward degree completion. Providing effective supports for these students as they navigate their postsecondary experiences is an important determinant of success, the implications of which can be far-reaching. The purpose of the current study discussed in this article was to examine the impact of Wyman's Teen Leadership Program (TLP) on positive college outcomes for low-income, first-generation students pursuing higher education at Missouri State University (MSU). TLP is a community-based, postsecondary access and success program comprising three developmentally progressive phases that begin when teens are ninth graders and ends after their second year of postsecondary education. During the postsecondary phase of the program, TLP works in close partnership with higher education institutions like MSU to effectively support students through caring relationships and coordinated services. Using a mixed-methods approach, the authors analyzed the college retention rates and grade point averages (GPAs) of 39 TLP participants attending MSU and 82 comparison students with similar background characteristics. Findings revealed statistically higher retention rates and GPAs for TLP participants compared to non-participants. Focus groups were also conducted to better understand the perceptions of TLP participants (n = 15) and TLP staff members (n = 6). Using Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering as a framework, the authors analyzed focus group responses, from which three overarching themes emerged: relationships, intentional experiences, and self-efficacy. The study findings suggest that postsecondary access and success programs are most effective when their curricula and program experiences are supported by strong and consistent student-adult relationships.

*Keywords*: college access and success programs, first-generation college students, low-income college students, higher education

College is a formative endeavor for young people, one that teaches vital lessons both inside and outside the classroom and that can significantly influence the long-term trajectory of a young person's life (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Unfortunately, the opportunity to pursue a college education is not afforded to all equally; socioeconomic status can unduly dictate the access a young person has to the resources and tools necessary to successfully navigate this path. Indeed, students from disadvantaged circumstances often face a host of obstacles in their efforts to earn a degree, and the implications of their educational success are far-reaching (Engle & Tinto, 2008; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2001; Spradlin, Burroughs, Rutkowski, Lang, & Hardesty, 2010).

Educational attainment is linked to a variety of factors affecting quality of life and can strongly influence the perpetuation of the cycle of poverty. Degree attainment also matters for long-term employment and earning potential. Recent data from the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2018) showed that those with a bachelor's degree earned, on average, 152% more than workers who had completed some college but had not attained a degree, due to the earning potential of career opportunities available only to those with educational credentials. The same data also showed that unemployment rates were 1.6 times greater among those who had not completed a degree. Moreover, educational attainment can also impact long-term individual and community-level outcomes, including reliance on public assistance, exposure to chronic stress, likelihood of being diagnosed with chronic illness, and life expectancy (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

The gap in degree attainment among low-income students compared to their higher income counterparts is stark. While 87% of high school graduates whose families fell within the top quartile of household income entered a postsecondary institution in 2014, only 60% of those whose families fell within the bottom quartile of income enrolled in postsecondary education (Cahalan, Perna, Yamashirta, Ruiz, & Franklin, 2016). Among students graduating from low-income high schools (where at least 50% of the student body qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch) in 2016, only 54% pursued a postsecondary option the first fall after graduation (National Student Clearinghouse, 2017). If they do enroll, low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students often struggle to persist in their postsecondary education. First-time college enrollees from families in the bottom quartile of household income achieve a bachelor's degree within six years of enrollment at a rate 33 percentage points lower than their peers from the top quartile of household income (26% vs. 59%, respectively; Cahalan et. al, 2016).

In his seminal theory of retention and departure, Tinto (1975) described many of the barriers faced by LIFG students. Tinto proposed that the strongest predictor of whether a student persists or drops out of higher education is the student's level of integration, both academic and social. Factors contributing to this integration include socioeconomic status, parental education, family expectations for the student's education, and quality of pre-college education (Tinto, 1975). Schlossberg's (1989) theory of marginality and mattering expands on Tinto's ideas about social integration, asserting that a support system and feeling of belonging, as opposed to feelings of marginalization, contribute heavily to success at a postsecondary institution. Because LIFG students are historically a marginalized group, their feelings of mattering within their college community are especially critical (Schlossberg, 1989).

Data and applied research have supported these theories, illustrating the unique challenges LIFG students face in enrolling and persisting in higher education. Through each phase of their higher education pursuit, these students face academic, financial, and cultural barriers that are often reinforced by institutional policy and systemic inequity. Typically, these students attend struggling school districts with low academic achievement or low-rigor academic programs that do not prepare them for college. Scores on college entrance exams, such as the SAT and ACT, correlate positively with family income, an effect that is even more pronounced for test takers with family incomes at the poverty level. As Dixon-Roman, Everson, and McArdle (2013) noted, the scores needed to make LIFG students eligible for admission into a university are often unattainable.

Those LIFG students who do make it to their first semester of college continue to face barriers as they navigate the postsecondary sphere, often with insufficient institutional supports and financial resources to ensure their success (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Even after accounting for student loan assistance, LIFG students typically have a larger unmet financial need than their non-LIFG peers, requiring them to work more while enrolled and therefore divert time and attention away from academics and integration into campus life (Engle & Tinto, 2008). LIFG students often work more hours off campus, take fewer credit hours, and receive lower grades than peers whose parents attended college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Further, a low-quality high school education leads many LIFG's to remedial coursework: Between 2010 and 2014, 40% of first-generation college students enrolled in remedial coursework, compared to 27% of students with a parent who had obtained a degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Required remedial coursework can set students back both financially and along their degree path, as these classes require regular tuition but do not count toward a student's degree credits earned. According to recent statistics, two- and four-year college students pay approximately $1.3 billion dollars in tuition for remediation in the United States annually, though less than 10% of these students graduate on time (Jimenez, Sargrad, Morales, & Thompson, 2016).

In addition, LIFG students tend to have substantially less knowledge about university processes and procedures and less realistic expectations for their course of study and career paths than their non-LIFG peers (Pascarella et. al, 2004). LIFG students' lack of exposure to and knowledge of the experiences and "norms" associated with higher education due to their family backgrounds—commonly referred to as *cultural capital*—often shapes their postsecondary experiences and leads to greater struggles persisting in college than their non-LIFG peers experience (NCES, 2001; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012). LIFG students, many of whom are students of color, may also face greater challenges assimilating to college life, often experiencing marginalization on campus, particularly at institutions lacking in student, faculty, and staff diversity. These institutions often offer limited curriculum reflective of multicultural or diverse perspectives, and typically do not present a campus climate inclusive of diverse populations (McClain & Perry, 2017). They may also struggle with returning home and receiving messages from family and peers about being disconnected from their community of origin (Engle, 2007). These systemic disadvantages and this lack of social support can leave LIFG students feeling out of place and unsure of themselves, resulting in low self-esteem (Hottinger & Rose, 2006; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014).

Though the barriers to pursuing and completing a degree for LIFG students are many, they are not insurmountable. Because these challenges are broad and interwoven, so too are the methods for addressing them. At the broadest level, it is important for K-12 and higher education institutions and communities to implement policies and practices designed to ensure success for all students. At the individual level, peer support is particularly important; Dennis, Phinney, and Chuateco (2005) found that maintaining fulfilling peer support predicted grade point average (GPA) among LIFG students. Consistent with Schlossberg's (1989) theory, research has indicated that high feelings of marginalization and low feelings of mattering contribute to low self-efficacy, but this relationship can be mitigated by feelings of belonging to a peer group. Self-efficacy, which impacts GPA and enrollment persistence (Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010), informs an internal locus-of-control mindset, whereby students believe they have the ability to mitigate adversity, and as such encourages students to access and engage with institutional student support services. Utilization of campus resources reinforces academic integration, thus making inclusion in a social support network to which LIFG students feel they belong especially important (Tinto, 2004; Yeager et. al, 2016).

Positive relationships with adults can also be beneficial to youth pursuing higher education, both directly and indirectly. Young people who experience a strong mentoring relationship with an adult are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors and demonstrate positive social-emotional skills, such as emotion management, self-awareness, and responsibility, all of which serve to strengthen resolve and improve academic outcomes (Roehlkepartain et al, 2017). Mentorship and coaching around making smart institutional, academic, and, in particular, financial choices are vital to setting up LIFG students for success, especially considering that inability to afford enrollment accounts for 54% of these students' rationale for dropping out (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Tinto, 2004). Effective advising both before and after enrollment helps LIFG students select colleges that will provide appropriate supports and offer sustainable financial aid, and to ensure they know how to most efficiently earn credits, access supports, and manage financial demands so that they may persist beyond their first semester (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

## The Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine the effectiveness of a postsecondary access and success program designed to address many of the barriers and challenges faced by LIFG students in their pursuit of higher education. Wyman's Teen Leadership Program (TLP) was established in 2002 and is based within a nonprofit organization in the midwestern United States. Wyman's mission is to empower teens from economically disadvantaged circumstances to lead successful lives and build strong communities; the organization envisions a day when all young people in the United States will thrive in learning, work, and life. Wyman delivers high-impact programs to youth directly, trains and builds capacity in others to effectively support youth, and partners with youth-serving systems to improve youth outcomes. Through positive youth development strategies and innovative approaches, Wyman supports youth in achieving educational success, developing healthy behaviors and relationships, and exhibiting life and leadership skills. Uniquely, TLP comprises three developmentally progressive phases that begin when teens are ninth graders and ends after their second year of postsecondary education. Its multi-year approach differentiates the program from other, similarly oriented college access programs. TLP participants are recruited as eighth graders from local low-income public and charter middle schools with which Wyman maintains partnerships, though for many of the participants in this study, the program formerly began one year earlier, when students were recruited as seventh graders. TLP recruits from a total of 12 school districts in a metropolitan region. Middle school teachers, administrators, and school counselors encourage interested students to submit an application, which includes a personal essay. Based on their essays and family income level, selected applicants are then invited to an in-person interview, during which they are asked to participate in teambuilding exercises with peers and to engage on-on-one with an adult interviewer. From this pool, approximately 80 youth are invited to join the new program cohort.

Each year of programming features an intensive summer experience followed by consistent personal and academic coaching throughout the school year.

Years 1 and 2 of the program (ninth and 10th grades) focus on "Leadership and Exploration," with the goals of facilitating relationship building with adults and peers, building youth social and emotional learning skills, and providing opportunities for participants to explore their personal strengths and interests. Teens attend a 21-day summer camp experience and a four-day wilderness travel experience focusing on outdoor adventure, civil rights, and community service. They participate in teambuilding exercises as well as workshops centering on communication, problem solving, and leadership, and complete strengths inventories to assess where their talents lie. All of these activities take place within a "camp" atmosphere, where teens are encouraged to step out of their comfort zones and bond with the peers in their cohort. Years 3 and 4 (11th and 12th grades) focus on "Postsecondary and Career Readiness" by providing opportunities for youth to explore postsecondary options in an effort to help them determine the settings and institutions that would be a good fit, enhance their understanding of the connections among coursework, college majors, and career paths, and develop the knowledge needed to successfully apply to and enroll in a postsecondary institution. Teens entering their junior year of high school participate in an eight-day, multi-state college tour, which allows them to see first-hand the different types of higher education paths available and encourages them to begin developing their preferences. High school seniors participate in a seven-day college community immersion experience, designed to acclimate them to the resources available on a university campus. During their stay, teens participate in workshops focused on applying for college admission, applying for financial aid, college entrance essay writing, and résumé building. Years 5 and 6 (first- and second-year postsecondary) support youth as they embark and persist on their educational path. The goals during this "Persistence" phase are to support participants in understanding and securing financial aid, navigating college life and requirements, and ensuring a match between their academic studies and career paths. These youth participate in a three-day Summer Bridge program, which offers a variety of small-group sessions on topics ranging from roommate conflict and personal safety to building a professional network and navigating career goals. Workshops and individual coaching sessions are designed with the overall purpose of building life skills and supporting students who may not start college on a level playing field to overcome barriers and advocate for themselves.

In addition to these summer offerings, TLP staff are in contact at least quarterly with youth throughout the school year via in-person and phone conversations. Staff track and advise high school students around college application benchmarks, financial aid completion, current grades, and college entrance exam preparation and completion, and provide coaching on personal social and emotional barriers, including connecting teens with necessary resources. College students receive financial guidance on FAFSA completion, scholarships, and debt load management; institutional guidance around connecting to campus and faculty, and effective integration into college life; and general guidance around supportive contacts, time and stress management strategies, and help-seeking behaviors. Parents of high school-aged participants are also offered workshops providing general information about postsecondary access and readiness, as well as a specific session focused on FAFSA completion.

Wyman's TLP also works in close partnership with higher education institutions, such as Missouri State University (MSU), to provide ongoing academic, institutional, and financial support to students who participate in Wyman's TLP and attend that institution. Through the MSU-Wyman partnership, TLP students get to know MSU through pre-college tours and stays on campus, helping them experience campus life and identify the setting best suited to them. TLP students who attend MSU are connected with a "Wyman Club" on campus, giving them access to a network of supportive peers and upperclassmen. In addition to receiving ongoing coaching from their TLP staff member, students receive the additional support of a full-time MSU staff member dedicated to coordinating services and maintaining communication with the TLP staff regarding their progress and challenges. The MSU staff member provides a single point of contact for all areas of the university and streamlines multiple processes. The MSU staff member also serves as an academic advisor for all TLP students and is familiar with the particular types of challenges TLP students will most commonly encounter. Lastly, scholarships supported by both Wyman and MSU are provided to qualifying TLP students to help cover tuition and residence costs. Through this partnership and deep coordination between MSU and TLP staff, students are supported by consistent, caring relationships and coordinated services. To date, 55 youth have benefitted from this partnership over the past 10 years.

Using a mixed-methods research design, the current study sought to better understand the impact of Wyman's TLP for participating students and was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do Wyman's TLP participants enrolled at MSU achieve a greater overall GPA compared to the overall GPA of a matched group of students who did not participate in Wyman's TLP?
2. Do Wyman's TLP participants enrolled at MSU have a higher retention rate compared to the retention rate of a matched group of students who did not participate in Wyman's TLP?
3. What elements of Wyman's TLP program do Wyman's TLP participants and staff indicate are critical to students' college success?

## Method

## Participants

GPA and retention rate data were obtained in the fall of 2016 from records of 39 participants who were low-income, first-generation, students enrolled in Wyman's TLP and who had attended MSU since the fall of 2014. This sample represented all students who had participated in TLP and entered MSU between fall 2014 and fall 2016. GPA data obtained for this study were from students' first semester of their freshman year. Of the 39 students, 61.5% were African-American, 30.8% were Caucasian, and 7.7% were multi-racial. Further, 66.7% of the sample were female, 30.8% were male, and 2.6% were gender non-conforming.

Data from a group of 82 students were used for comparison. Comparison students were low-income, first-generation students who had attended the same high schools as Wyman's TLP participants and attended MSU but had never enrolled in or been served by Wyman's TLP program. Data collected from comparison students' records included GPAs from the first semester of their freshman year (fall 2016) and their enrollment status in the spring of 2017. Because comparison data were de-identified, gender and race data were not available for the comparison group students.

All 39 of Wyman's TLP participants were also invited to participate in a focus group to explore their experiences in the program. Of the 39 invited, 15 of Wyman's TLP participants consented to participate in the study and then completed an anonymous demographic survey. Over half (54%) of the focus group participants were female, 40% were male, and 6% were gender non-conforming. A majority of the focus group participants identified as African-American (60%) followed by Bi-racial (20%) and Caucasian (20%). In terms of class standing, 26% were current freshmen, 40% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, and 13% were seniors. A variety of majors were represented among the sample, including health and human services (20%), criminology (20%), business (13%), humanities (13%), fine arts (7%), education (7%), and undeclared (7%). In addition, six current and past TLP staff who worked directly with students participated in individual interviews with the first author.

## Measures and Procedure

A de-identified, quantitative dataset was obtained from the higher education institution's Office of Institutional Research. The dataset included each student's GPA for the first semester of their freshman year as well as their enrollment status for the following spring semester. Data were obtained and stored in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets.

The focus groups were designed to be interactive and to provide the 15 students who had volunteered to participate an opportunity to discuss their experiences in Wyman's TLP, including their opinions and perceptions of how their skills and competencies may have changed as a result of their participation and the program elements critical to their success. A total of three focus groups with five students in each were conducted with assignment to groups based solely on student availability. Each focus group was facilitated by one individual trained by the first author, lasted approximately one hour, and took place in an on-campus conference room. In each focus group session, the facilitator asked the same set of questions (see Appendix A), encouraging self-disclosure while assuring students that there were no right or wrong answers. TLP staff interviews were conducted individually by the first author and included a series of questions (see Appendix B) focused on the adult's role in students' experiences in the program and their observations of students' experiences matriculating into and persisting through college. Focus groups and interviews were audio and video recorded and were transcribed by an independent third party who was paid for this service and was not involved in the data collection process. Focus group and interview participants were assigned pseudonyms by the third party to ensure their anonymity in the transcriptions.

## Results

### Analytic Approach

Quantitative data for this study included GPAs and retention rates of participants in Wyman's TLP and comparison students with similar demographic characteristics. Using Microsoft Excel, a *z*-test was performed to test the difference between the proportion of students returning for a second semester in each group at $\alpha = 0.05$. A *t*-test was used to compare both groups' mean GPA in an effort to examine the statistical difference between the means at $\alpha = 0.05$. Data were examined for normality and found to be approximately symmetric ($PI = -.27$ for TLP; $PI = -.39$ for comparison group). Table 1 provides descriptive data for GPA and retention rates by group.

Table 1

*Average Grade Point Averages and Retention Rates Per Group*

| **Variable** | ***n*** | ***M*** | ***t*** | ***z*** | ***p*** |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| GPA | | | | | |
| TLP Group | 39 | 2.88 | 2.764 | n/a | .007 |
| Comparison Group | 82 | 2.40 | | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Retention Rate | | | | | |
| TLP Group | 39 | .95 | n/a | 2.205 | .02 |
| Comparison Group | 82 | .79 | | | |

*Notes*. TLP = Teen Leadership Program; GPA = Grade Point Average. GPA measured on a 4.0 scale.

For both focus group and interview data, the first author reviewed the typed transcripts and manually analyzed the raw data to identify consistent and recurring themes, following the analytic approach outlined by Creswell (2014). This approach aligned well with the objective of the qualitative portion of study—that is, to learn from the viewpoints, experiences, and feelings of the program participants and staff about the critical elements of program success. Using the guidelines set forth by Creswell, the raw transcript data were read multiple times to validate the patterns and themes that arose within and across the interview and focus group data. During each reading, reflections and interpretations were summarized using extensive notes and tallies for each question to help highlight the consistencies across responses. Through this iterative process, the raw transcript data were organized and coded into categories representative of the themes that emerged from the data. Finally, once clear themes emerged from this analytic process, the transcripts were read a final time to identify specific quotations that best exemplified the findings.

## Grade Point Average

GPA data for students in Wyman's TLP and in the comparison group were collected for the first semester of their freshman year. The mean GPA for the 39 TLP students was 2.88 (on a 4.0 scale). The GPA of the 82 comparison group students was 2.40. A *t*-test revealed that the difference between the two GPAs was statistically significant, $t(119) = 2.764$, $p = .007$.

## Retention Rate

Retention data for students in Wyman's TLP and the for comparison group were collected, representing their enrollment from the first to second semester. Of the 39 students served by Wyman's TLP, 37 returned for their second semester of college, at a 95% retention rate. For students in the comparison group, 65 out of 82 returned for their second semester, at a retention rate of 79%. The *z*-test revealed that the retention rate among Wyman's TLP students was significantly higher than the retention rate of the comparison group, $z = 2.205$, $p =.02$.

### Converging Focus Group and Interview Themes

In response to those focus group and interview questions that centered on understanding student and staff perspectives on the critical elements of programming, the following overarching themes emerged:

**Theme 1: Adult-student relationships**. In response to the focus group question about how the program had helped overcome challenges, multiple students mentioned the support they had received from adult staff. As one student commented, "Even though [Wyman's TLP staff] can't do everything … they have been a big support any time there has been an issue or a problem, something that you need, they are always there." Another student expressed that "the counselors were there in the time in life when we needed them and motivate[d] us and guide[d] us through middle and high school … just a guiding light for college." Several students mentioned staff support as one of the top two services provided by the program, with one student commenting, "Support comes from staff just being there, being able to answer questions, being available." Many students mentioned "family" and "relationships" when asked to give three words to describe the program, pointing to the close bonds that had been formed within the context of the program. Staff member interview responses aligned with those of the students regarding the importance of the support staff and the relationships that are developed. All staff pointed to their success with students as being driven by the desire to seek out and create positive, caring relationships with youth in the program. As one staff member commented, staff success was due to "really understanding and believing in the power of caring, consistent relationships between students and with a well-trained adult." Another staff member observed that "the relationship-based and individualized approach [of Wyman's TLP] is not the norm that I see in a lot of programs." Another summed it up simply: "The reason why our program works is because of relationships." As reported by both students and staff, the factors contributing to the strength of the relationships included their "consistency" and "longevity." One student stated that the strength of their relationship with Wyman's TLP staff was because they had "known them since 7$^{th}$ grade and they've been with us now in … college." Likewise, a staff member shared, "Persistence is key in these relationships…. Wyman will always be there and they are reliable." Finally, another staff member noted the impact of a supportive connection because it allows students to "see possibilities, think about possibilities [students] would never have [or] never considered elsewhere." Taken together, responses to both student focus group and staff interview questions illustrate the strong relational bond created between students and staff in Wyman's TLP. From students' perspectives, this was largely expressed through highly valuing and relying on the support they received from staff; staff expressed this by discussing the unique and purposeful approach they took to creating positive relationships, which, in turn, paved the way for making a difference in the students' lives.

**Theme 2: Intentional experiences**. When asked to describe the role that Wyman's TLP had played in helping them overcome challenges to postsecondary education, focus group participants commented on how the program had taught them to become independent and supported them through transitions via program experiences. In response to a question about the top two services they had received from the program, all students mentioned either college preparation activities, camp experiences, or supportive staff. For example, one student commented,

> I think [Wyman's TLP] helped ease that transition from adolescence to adulthood, *especially having the yearly getaway going to camp* [emphasis added], being away from your family for like a month and learning how to interact with people without your parents being there.

Another student also commented on the importance of camp experiences, which "took a bunch of inner-city kids and exposed them to the wilderness. I feel like they showed us that there's more out there than just the street we grew up on or the poverty that we see every day." Another student reflected further on the camp experience: "It throws you into a new environment, and [shows you] how to get out of your comfort zone, and teaches you leadership skills, and prepares you for the future."

Student focus group responses also highlighted the significance of college preparation activities in Wyman's TLP. Many pointed to the college tours, which are part of the program, as their only experiences on a college campus prior to starting school, and as one of the most important services provided to them by TLP. For example, one student asserted that they learned more about college in "one week" [of college tours] than they did in four years of high school. The same student also reflected, "Because over the college tours, we went to many different kinds of colleges, and we learned more about colleges that you won't learn in school. I felt the college tour prepared me more for college." Another student asserted, "Everything I've learned and even know [sic] about college was through Wyman." Another student commented, "[TLP] helped me overcome my fears about a lot of different things … get through a mud cave, climb a mountain … if I could survive those things, then I can survive college."

The interview responses of staff members illustrated the intentionality of activities and experiences designed to enhance a supportive atmosphere and increase students' cultural capital around higher education and leadership. The experiences and activities were created to expose students to a variety of postsecondary options. For example, one staff member emphasized that Wyman's TLP "roots [are] in summer camping" and the "experiential learning" involved with "outdoor challenges. I think that by using those methods we are able to expose and really challenge our young people in ways they are not going to be challenged at home or in their communities." Staff also commented on the importance of helping students set a postsecondary goal for themselves, commenting that "each step along the way we are doing developmentally appropriate activities [so students understand] there is a path [for them to college]." Through their interview responses, staff also illustrated the impact of the intentional program experience on the students they served: "Being able to help them make those connections in those challenges and experiences that we are exposing them to here at [Wyman's TLP] … helping them see how they work through those … and helping them apply it back to a college frame [is important]." Overall, the responses of student focus group participants and adult staff members were congruent in highlighting key program experiences—particularly the camp and college tour experiences—that helped drive students' success.

**Theme 3: Self-efficacy**. Across multiple focus group questions, students reflected on the ways Wyman's TLP supported them on their journey to independence. As one student voiced,

> I owe Wyman everything as to who I am today [sic]…. They really gave you [sic] the foundation I needed to become independent.... [Wyman's TLP] teaches you to be independent…. You really need to be independent, especially if you're from a low-income family down here [at college] on your own.

Another student asserted that TLP "helped a lot with self-worth … they instill in all their students, 'You can do this, you can do that,' which if you didn't know any better, you wouldn't have just thought of on your own." One other student affirmed that TLP "made all of us not [just] be listeners of this information but make us want to put it into action and [be] doers [sic]. Doers make their dreams come alive." Similarly, staff member interview responses highlighted the role of Wyman's TLP in helping students find their voices, foster their independence, and develop their confidence to lead. One staff member illustrated the way the program instills a sense of "belief" in the students:

> One of the first things I think about first-gen students is belief. Do they believe they can be successful beyond high school? Do they believe they can achieve? Do they believe they can get a college degree? Do they believe that they can have a career that's going to help sustain and pour back into the family? So, the first thing is the belief piece.

In discussing aspects of Wyman's TLP that are key to impacting success in college, several staff members highlighted the role of self-efficacy. One staff member explained that the program's approach to helping students achieve success is "not so much [by] teaching them what to think but how to think…. We have to allow students to make the decisions." Another staff member further reflected, "[We instill] this idea of both knowing who you are, then representing who you are authentically and with some responsibility to your peers and to society." Staff responses also illustrated that they could see growth in students' self-efficacy skills over time as students improved their "capacity to use their voice to influence what's going on around them" as well as "confidence in themselves as leaders … the capacity to make change … [and the understanding,] 'I have an important voice that can and should be used.'"

Taken together, both student and staff responses to focus group and interview questions pointed consistently to the importance of developing self-efficacy skills (sometimes referred to as "finding their voice" or "belief"). By these accounts, the program's approach and experiences indeed strengthened students' self-efficacy skills, thereby successfully supporting them in moving from a dependent state toward greater independence.

**Discussion**

The current study examined college retention rates and GPAs of low-income, first-generation students who participated in Wyman's Teen Leadership Program and were enrolled at Missouri State University. The qualitative portion of the mixed-methods study included focus groups and interviews to inform understanding of the critical elements of programming from TLP student and adult staff perspectives.

Overall, the quantitative analysis of retention and GPA data provided support for the effectiveness of Wyman's TLP in promoting successful postsecondary outcomes for the LIFG students whom the program serves. When compared to a group of MSU students with similar demographic characteristics, Wyman's TLP participants' retention rates and GPAs were significantly higher, suggesting that the experiences gained through the program and the maintenance of close ties with Wyman staff members into college provides an advantage to LIFG students pursuing higher education.

Through the student focus groups and adult staff interviews, three overarching themes of program impact emerged: relationships, intentional experiences, and self-efficacy. Students and staff members highlighted the strength and longevity of relationships—the most common theme from the focus groups and interviews—as the backbone of college success. This emphasis on relationships coincides with Schlossberg's (1989) notion that postsecondary success relates related to the extent to which a student feels connected and the extent to which those connections allow students to believe in their own self-worth and ability to be active agents in their environment. The transition from high school into college, as Tinto (1975, 1987. 1993) and Schlossberg (1989) noted, is a time of great concern and uncertainty, particularly for LIFG students, and students in transition are vulnerable to feeling marginalized. The relationship between students and TLP staff members develops into a support system, the strength of which is related to first-generation college students' academic success and matriculation (Ishitani, 2006).

Another theme, intentional experiences, emerged as a critical program element, with respondents perceiving that Wyman's TLP program activities are intentionally designed to support students in helping them feel like they belong in a college environment. This too is an important element for LIFG students, as they are more likely to enter the new experience of college with great uncertainty and have vastly different experiences in college than traditional students (Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Ward et al., 2012).

Strong relationships with Wyman's TLP staff and intentional programmatic experiences support students' growing capacity to use their voices, develop confidence as leaders, and foster their belief that they can achieve their goals—encapsulated in the term *self-efficacy*—emerged as the third theme. As a student increases their self-efficacy, they transition from a state of dependency into independence (Bandura, 1997); in this state of independence, a student finds their own voice and takes control of their own situation (Katz, Eliot, & Nevo, 2014). One goal of Wyman's TLP is to help students who may not start college on a level playing field overcome barriers and advocate for themselves—an important factor of success in higher education (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2009; Tinto, 2012). When students fully grasp the ideas of representing themselves, being their own self-advocate, and moving into independence—the foundation of which is rooted in the support and belonging experienced through positive relationships with adults—the barriers they face in higher education due to their backgrounds are more likely to be overcome (Ward et al., 2012). Figure 1 depicts the hypothesized relationships among the themes that emerged from the qualitative portion of the study. As the figure illustrates, intentional programmatic experiences and strong, positive adult-student relationships are expected to be both mutually reinforcing and predictive of improved self-efficacy among LIFG youth served. In turn, improved self-efficacy is the mechanism through which postsecondary success is achieved.

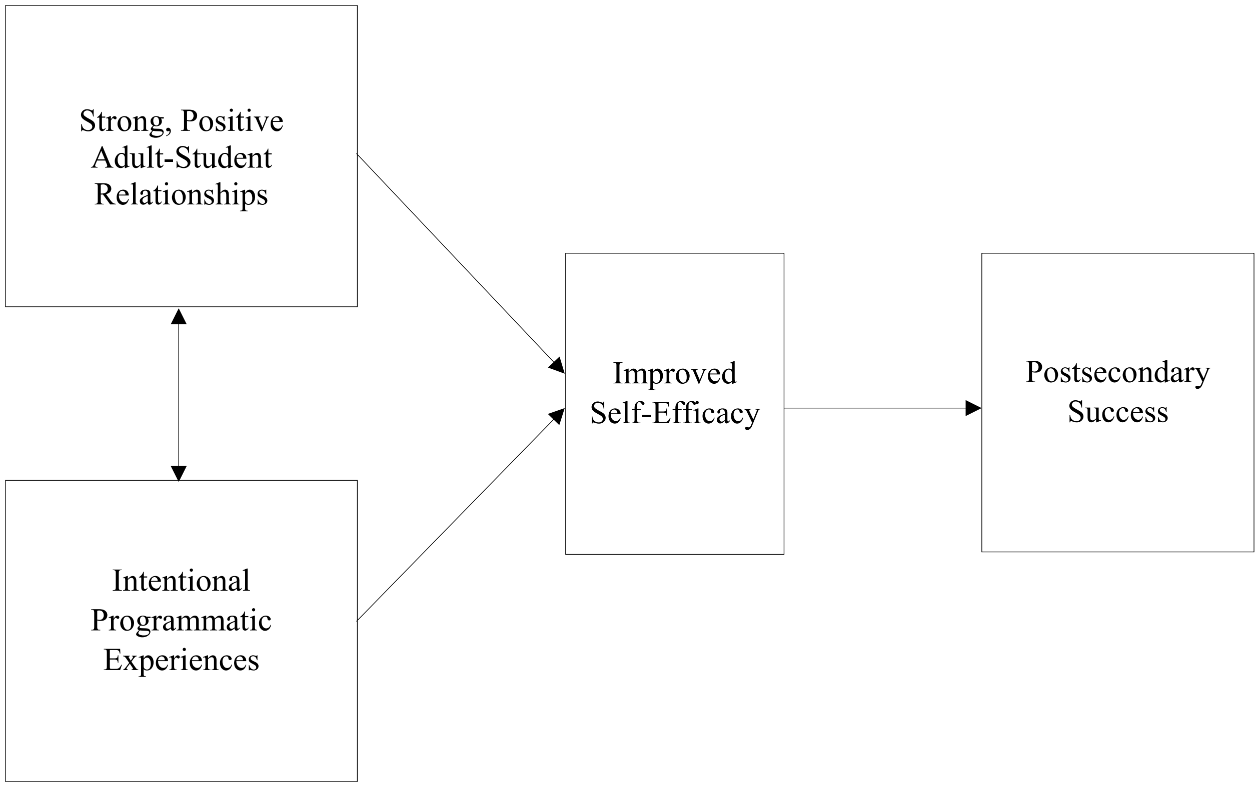


*Figure 1*. Path model depicting hypothesized relationships among focus group themes and postsecondary success

The emerging themes of this study have important implications for practice. The findings underscore the need for strong, supportive youth-adult relationships to be at the core of college access programming. As Schlossberg (1989) pointed out, students need to feel as if they matter, and staff members need to be competent in fostering students' sense of self-worth and belonging. The current study's findings highlight that the longevity and constancy of relationships are paramount for students in building trust with adult program staff. College success programming will be more successful if programs maintain constancy of staff members who work with students (Smith, Benitez, Carter, & Melnick, 2012).

The study findings also suggest that college access program designers should create curricula and experiences around the relationship between students and staff members. Likewise, the design of any curriculum should be based on trust, be holistic in approach, make direct correlations between experiences and necessary skills, and move students from a state of dependence to independence. The goal of all college access programs and institutions of higher education should be to help bridge the gap in access and academic achievement for all low-income, first-generation students. Strong relationships between community organizations and institutions of higher education help ensure that these gaps are being bridged.

Although the current study yielded important information about the effectiveness of Wyman's TLP and perceptions of its critical components, there are several limitations that should be noted. Because the focus of this study centered solely on one community-based college access program at one higher education institution, the results may not generalize beyond the study sample. Further, since the study did not include random assignment to treatment groups, we cannot conclude a causal relationship between participation in the program and increased retention or GPA. The small sample size of students who participated in the study also creates limitations in assessing the reliability of the results. Lastly, students' financial data were not collected for this study, and finances could have influenced students' ability to remain in college (Spradlin et al., 2010).

Future research regarding college access programming should continue to explore the development and maintenance of relationships as a means to minimize marginalization among low-income, first-generation college students. These studies may focus on measuring sense of belonging and the construct of self-efficacy more directly, as well as investigating the relationship between particular elements of college access programming, including both student-adult relationships and peer relationships, and the development of these attributes.

A postsecondary degree is invaluable in helping those in disadvantaged circumstances improve their socioeconomic futures (Payne, 2013). The total enrollment of institutions of higher education is growing and diversifying, and includes a large proportion of first-generation, low-income, urban students (Casazza & Silverman, 2013; Ward et al., 2012). It is imperative to gain a deeper understanding of "what works and how" and to use that learning to build effective programs and supports that address challenges disproportionately affecting college attendance, enrollment, and completion among low-income, first-generation students.

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## Appendix A: Student Focus Group Question Guide

1. Up until this point, what challenges, both personal and educational, have you encountered as a first-generation/low-income student?
2. What role has participating in Wyman's TLP played in helping you overcome those challenges?
3. Tell me about the relationships and support systems you have developed while participating in Wyman's TLP and in what way have they helped you:
    a. Student
    b. Wyman's TLP Staff
    c. College faculty/staff
4. What matters and motivates you in your college?
5. Has this educational experience in college been what you expected? Why or why not?
6. How strongly do you feel your participation in Wyman's TLP contributed to your success?
7. When you think about Wyman's TLP, what three words come to mind?
8. In your opinion, what were the top two services provided to you by Wyman's TLP?
9. What can Wyman's TLP do to improve, and if given the opportunity, what would you change about the program to help you or future participants be more successful in college?
10. Is there something you wish to tell me about your experiences that I did not ask you?

## Appendix B: Staff Interview Questions

1. What personal characteristics do you possess which have helped you succeed with the students you serve?
2. Do you use any non-conventional methods when educating and mentoring first-generation/low-income students? If so, what are the methods?
3. How do you motivate first-generation/low-income college students to complete college?
4. What barriers, personal and educationally, do you see first-generation/low-income college students have or experience while participating in the program and attending college?
5. How important do you feel the student/TLP relationship is in your students' educational pursuits?
6. How do you emphasize to students the importance of success in college? What indicators do they give you that they understand?
7. What traits does the program try to instill in students that you believe makes them successful in college? And how do you go about teaching them?
8. Over the time period when students are involved in the program, how do you see them change or grow?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of not being a federally funded program, like other college access programs/
    a. Do you feel that makes a difference to students' success in getting into and persisting in college? Why or why not?

## Authors

Dr. Ryan Reed is the Coordinator of Access Programs at Missouri State University where he oversees the partnership between MSU and community-based college access programs. It is Dr. Reed's responsibility to advise first-generation/low-income students on scholarships. Dr. Reed has a BA in Communications -Colorado Christian University, a MS in College Student Affairs -Eastern Illinois University and a EdD in Instructional Leadership -Lindenwood University. Dr. Reed has over 15 years of experience at multiple institutions in the areas of residence life, academic advising, admissions, and student affairs.

Dr. Thomson is a Research Analyst in the Research & Learning Department at Wyman Center in St. Louis, MO. Since receiving her PhD in Developmental Psychology from Saint Louis University in 2004, Nicki has worked in the field of applied research and program evaluation. Through her work, Nicki has helped secure federal, state, and local funding to implement programs that focus on improving the lives of youth and their families; designed and supervised quantitative and qualitative evaluations of these programs; and, analyzed, presented and published data from this work. At Wyman since 2015, Nicki has helped to develop and improve upon internal evaluation processes, including logic model development, outcome and implementation measurement, data analysis and dissemination of results. She also reviews current research and best practices in the field to inform Wyman's program design and improvement efforts.

Grace Bramman is an Associate Director with the Wyman Center in St. Louis, MO. Grace earned her Masters in Social Work from Washington University in 2013 and her clinical social work license in 2016. She specializes in positive youth development and program evaluation. At Wyman, Grace designs and conducts evaluation and continuous quality improvement processes across agency programming, as well as writing, managing, and reporting on grants supporting agency work. Previously, she worked in direct service roles facilitating Wyman's Teen Outreach Program and providing social work services in school settings. Grace also holds Bachelors degrees in Psychology and Statistics from the University of Missouri-Columbia, where she worked in the Social Cognitive Neuroscience Lab studying alcohol's effects on cognitive processes.

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# Book Review: *Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom: Teaching to Close the Graduation Gap for Minority, First-Generation, and Academically Unprepared Students*

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*Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom: Teaching to Close the Graduation Gap for Minority, First-Generation, and Academically Unprepared Students.* By Kathleen F. Gabriel. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing. 2018. ISBN: 9781579225568. 190 pages. Paperback, $27.50.

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**Abstract**

In this article, the author reviews Kathleen F. Gabriel's 2018 book *Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom: Teaching to Close the Graduation Gap for Minority, First-Generation, and Academically Unprepared Students*. The book offers instructors both theories and practical tips for implementing inclusive success strategies within the classroom environment. The review identifies the primary purpose of the book, reviews key themes, explores a chapter in detail, and offers a critique of the entire work.

*Keywords*: teaching, retention, at-risk, first-generation, inclusion, mindset, classroom, community of learners

While efforts to retain minority, low-income, first-generation, and academically at-risk students are prevalent within student affairs divisions at colleges and universities, discussions about retention from the faculty perspective are not as frequent. In *Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom: Teaching to Close the Graduation Gap for Minority, First-Generation, and Academically Unprepared Students,* Kathleen F. Gabriel—an educational consultant who served previously as a high school social science teacher and an associate professor at California State University, Chico—makes a convincing case for why and how faculty are critical to creating communities of learners and promoting success for all students, especially those traditionally seen as at-risk. This book is a companion to Gabriel's 2008 *Teaching Unprepared Students: Strategies for Promoting Success and Retention in Higher Education*, though the two are stand-alone volumes. Her recent book is aimed at instructors at all types of higher education institutions—community colleges and universities alike—and reviews key strategies that faculty should consider integrating into their classrooms using a mix of theoretical philosophies and practical tips for applying those theories.

Gabriel starts by identifying challenges. While access to higher education has improved and while economic empowerment is a primary reason students seek out a college degree, many students, especially those identified as minority, low-income, first-generation, or academically at-risk, drop out prior to degree attainment. Gabriel argues that it is possible—necessary, in fact—for faculty to be key players in retention efforts of students by fostering communities of learners with appropriate instructor-student and peer-peer interactions while keeping expectations for academic performance and degree attainment high.

Each chapter of *Creating the Path to Success in the Classroom* offers a mix of research, usually tied to student development or learning theories, and big-picture views of why certain factors, such as a growth mindset, are relevant for students. The first two chapters discuss issues related to retention and classroom climate, though most of the book explores more specific aspects of teaching, such as lectures, writing assignments, and classroom discussions. Incorporating theory and practice in this way, while adopting a writing style grounded in personal stories and explanations, Gabriel makes a complete read-through of the book both enjoyable and educational. Yet, the structure also serves as a useful quick reference on classroom strategies around specific topics, such as when an instructor is struggling with students who are not completing their assigned readings.

For example, Chapter 5 examines interactive lectures. It begins by reviewing the traditional purpose of lectures—passing information to large numbers of students in a short time period—and challenges why most traditional lectures do not actively engage learners. Instead, such lectures encourage passive learning that could lead to a lack of focus. Rather than dismiss outright the traditional lecture format, however, Gabriel shares strategies for making lectures more engaging, like incorporating activities into lectures, encouraging students to work with and get to know other students from different backgrounds, and using specific techniques to facilitate and grade in-class activities (e.g., write-pair-shares, gallery walks, case studies, and having students vote to share their voice). In addition, the chapter highlights best practices for presenting lectures, including prevalent tips such as using visual aids appropriately as well as a refreshing look into the research of giving students a full or partial set of notes, an outline of information, or no notes on their learning effectiveness. As with all other chapters, Chapter 5 represents an appropriate mix of theoretical frameworks and comparisons, and it details techniques that accompany those frameworks.

Not only does this combination of theory and practice add value to the field of student learning, its emphasis on diversity and inclusion is woven throughout many narratives and descriptions of techniques, as well as the appendices. Gabriel examines this most thoroughly in Chapter 4, which focuses on motivation and attitudes. She argues that it is detrimental for students to be labeled into groups, since such categorization contributes to self-defeating behaviors. Faculty who fault high schools for not appropriately preparing students *for* college do not help those students where they are now—*in* college. Indeed, the mindset of instructors is important, and the mindset of students themselves is also critical, especially since many have received messages that they are not good enough. Gabriel provides tips on countering this mindset by suggesting relevant articles, encouraging instructors to examine their own cultural identity and learn about other identity groups, and sharing stories of others who have faced adversities but have persisted and overcome them. Similar advice and theories are included in other chapters as well, such as a discussion about supporting students who cannot afford textbooks while still holding them to the class reading and writing expectations.

Although the book does offer many relevant and creative approaches to creating a community of learners, it focuses solely on the classroom setting. Although Gabriel makes a case for why it is necessary for instructors to view retention as a key component of their job, she does not fully discuss the impact of other retention efforts on college campuses. In fact, she briefly mentions in the first chapter a study by Tinto that found that retention gains have stagnated in recent years despite a plethora of retention initiatives, especially from staff. Reflecting on this awareness that most retention efforts yield lackluster results makes it hard for any reader to want to implement significant changes to their student services practice. Ideally, this sentiment could have been expanded upon to explore why this is the case, to share how particular retention efforts actually compliment the classroom environment, and to persuade the reader of the importance of retention techniques applied in classroom environments.

Overall, however, Gabriel's book is a wonderful addition to the field of higher education. It offers a mix of theoretical discussions and practical tips to help instructors of all types improve the persistence of students, namely those who are minority, first-generation, and academically unprepared. It also encourages faculty to use culturally relevant stories and growth mindset language to better connect with students who are identified as minority or at-risk. In sum, this book effectively explores how to create an inclusive community of involved learners.

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# A New-Old Way to Explore Civic Engagement: Learning from the Past

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**Abstract**

The authors propose that student-centered discussion and reflection on the attributes of good citizenship and the good citizen constitute an important way to promote civic engagement. The expectations of the Framers of the Constitution and the teachings of Western political thought both hold that active and responsible citizenship is vital to the life of the political community. In this article, the authors argue that a good citizen: (1) has a vision of what their country is and what it means; (2), is willing to sacrifice their private interests for the public good, or rather their notion of the public good; (3) is willing to participate in the public domain, especially the political realm; and (4) will maintain their right to respectfully dissent and to critique the policies of those in power, recognizing the difference between country and policy or country and a particular president. The authors maintain that political polarization can be useful in the electoral cycle, but it is not good citizenship to the extent that it interferes with governing and solving the problems of the nation. Educators must communicate the message that politics and governing should not be zero-sum and that opposing sides must be able to work together to shape public policy.

*Keywords:* citizenship, civic engagement, civic education, political polarization

There is an emerging consensus within the political science profession that educators need to do more to promote civic engagement among millennials generally and college students in particular. In their recent volume, Chod, Muck, and Caliendo (2015) reported the results of research on the effectiveness of political science classes in promoting civic engagement and of using social media such as Facebook and Twitter as civic-engagement teaching tools in political science courses. As scholars study and debate the best methods for promoting civic engagement among young adults, we propose that student-centered discussion of and reflection on the attributes of the good citizen constitute another way to promote civic engagement. Our aim is for educators to encourage students to think about constructive citizenship: what it means to them and how to be creative, active, and thoughtful citizens in representative democracy. Such reflection, we believe, could help to curb the political polarization that is rampant in politics today.

We do not claim to have all the answers about what good citizenship entails. Rather, our goal in this article is to stimulate thought and discussion by proposing some aspects of good citizenship. We base our views on the thoughts of prominent Framers of our Constitution—namely, the authors of *The Federalist*—and important works of Western political thought with which the Framers would have been familiar. We realize that these are not the only sources for ideas on citizenship, but given their prominence in U.S. history, they are worth revisiting. We also acknowledge that other viewpoints on citizenship, including those of African-American political philosophers, would possibly lead to different conclusions than those we advocate here.

The expectations of the Framers of the Constitution and the teachings of Western political thought both reflect the tenet that responsible citizenship is vital to the life of the political community. Thus, in the case of the United States, it is crucial to the nation, states, and communities that citizens not become so discouraged and cynical that they withdraw from active participation. It is especially important for college students and other young adults, who represent the future of civic engagement, to stay engaged in the public realm and cultivate a lifelong habit of participation. We discuss these principles later in this article, but first we consider the basic question of why civic engagement is worth promoting.

It may seem a strange, even laughable, claim to some, but as noted by contemporary political philosopher Francis Kane (1998), politics can be a noble profession. Kane argued that politics is "the activity of public community" and that "very little of what we would consider today as essential for a flourishing existence could be accomplished without politics" (p. 139-142). However, as he maintained, politics is not natural but is rooted in the human abilities to think and choose, and "must be practiced if we are to get good at it." Indeed, politics is the manner in which society makes authoritative decisions, upholding some values or political philosophies while casting aside others, at least temporarily. This noble undertaking is an ongoing process and involves more than simply responding to crises in the community. It also requires the input of the diverse groups and viewpoints that comprise society as a whole.

One might reasonably conclude that the United States has endured because the people have risen to meet major challenges that have threatened it, while spending most of their lives pursuing their personal interests. However, is it healthy for a representative democracy if the majority of its citizens pursue a crisis-management model of citizenship, engaging in civic duties only when events call forth the need for such participation? Or is such an approach detrimental to the life of the political community? Active citizenship is the approach espoused by centuries of Western political thought and, importantly, expected by the Framers of the nation's constitutional system.

**Learning from the Past: Perspectives of the Framers and Western Political Thought**

It is instructive to remember the challenge posed by one of the Framers of the Constitution, Benjamin Franklin (Jameson, 1906). When asked what type of government the Constitutional Convention had developed, Franklin replied, "A republic if you can keep it" (p. 618). Franklin's response may or may not have indicated his skepticism as to whether the American people would be able to maintain the republic, that is, representative government. His statement, however, does represent a challenge: The republic will last only if citizens work at it. The endurance of the republic depends on the type of citizen people choose to be. Citizenship, if it represents one of the core responsibilities a person possesses, must be thought about constantly by citizens, not just by commentators and scholars, and engaged in regularly in order to "keep the republic."

Other Framers besides Franklin, notably the authors of *The Federalist*, had expectations about the relationship between the government and citizens, and the role that the people would play under the Constitution. A few examples are illustrative. Alexander Hamilton (2000), in "Federalist No. 16," spoke of the people as the natural guardians of the Constitution. The federal government, in the process of "regulating the common concerns and preserving the general tranquility" (pp. 97-98), must interact directly with the people and address itself immediately to the hopes and fears of individuals. In "Federalist No. 52," James Madison (2000) wrote that it is essential to liberty that government have a common interest with the people; in the case of the House of Representatives, the common interest or "intimate sympathy" with the people would be guaranteed by frequent elections to the House (p. 337). In "Federalist No. 55," Madison wrote that the "genius" of the American people and the principles incorporated into their political character would guarantee that they would not elect to the House members bent on subverting the republic in favor of tyranny or treachery (p. 357).[*] The authors of *The Federalist* believed that republican government required the citizenry to possess a higher degree of virtue than did other forms of government (p. 359).

Of particular relevance, given today's polarized political environment, is George Washington's (1999) warning, expressed in his farewell presidential address, about the dangers of parties and factions. Washington felt that the formation of parties, although "having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind" and "inseparable from our nature," was the worst enemy of popular government (p. 19). Washington believed that factions could, over time, become "potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government" (p. 17). Washington wrote that "the common and continual mischiefs of the spirit of party are sufficient to make it the interest and duty of a wise people to discourage and restrain it" (p. 20; see also Avlon, 2017). The spirit of faction enfeebled public administration, agitated the people with ill-founded jealousies, kindled animosities, and opened the door to foreign influence and corruption. While not taking serious issue with George Washington and his views on political parties, the authors would like to remind readers that the parties do play a vital role in representative democracy, including aggregation of interests and viewpoints into policies, recruitment of candidates, and the organization of legislative bodies at different levels of government.

The Framers, however, were not the first to articulate these ideas of responsible engaged citizenship. Two of the most important questions in Western political thought relate to the distinction between the private and public, and the purpose of community.

First, is the private sphere more important than the public? The private coexists with the public but can threaten the public if members of the government or the citizens themselves place their private interests above public interests. The private sphere can serve as a basis for the public sphere, but the public transcends the private and is greater than the private in that it promotes the common good. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1973), the 18th-century French philosopher, went so far as to argue that people place their individual powers in common under the supreme direction of the general will, that is, the common or public interest. Rousseau thought that an individual might have to be forced to submit to the general will but that, in being forced, the individual would be liberated. Not many would go that far today, but Rousseau's point is noteworthy. Also noteworthy, 17th-century British political philosopher John Locke spoke of "tacit consent." For Locke, tacit consent meant that anyone who has possessions or enjoyment of any part of the dominions

[*] Federalist Nos. 52 and 55 have also been attributed to Hamilton.

of any government has given their consent to that commonwealth and is obliged to obey its laws (Locke, 1988, pp. 347-348).

A second important theme in Western political thought is the purpose of community or of living in community. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (as cited in Barker, 1979), writing over two thousand years ago, stated that humankind is impelled by its nature to live in community, a polis. Natural impulse, combined with a common interest in attaining a share of the "good life," draw people to the polis. The good life is the chief end for the community as a whole and for each person individually. People come together and maintain their political association for the sake of life. The purpose of the state is a good quality of life, not merely life. The polis must therefore devote itself to encouraging goodness; otherwise, it is just an alliance. The Roman statesman Cicero (1976), who lived approximately two centuries after Aristotle, wrote that the commonwealth is the people's affair. People come together out of a common agreement about rights and law. Cicero asserted that the commonwealth should secure through its institutions and laws the pursuit of a happy and honorable life, and that the good life is impossible except in a good state. The goal of the ideal ruler of the commonwealth is the happiness of the citizens; thus, rulers should strive to make citizens secure in their resources, rich in wealth, great in renown, and distinguished in virtue. Thomas Aquinas (1949), the 13th-century scholar and clergyman, held that it is natural for humans to live in a group since a single individual could not procure all that was needed to live. The aim of the ruler should be to secure the welfare and the unity of the ruled, and a multitude gathered together should seek to live virtuously. The good life is the virtuous life. Only those who render mutual assistance to one another in living well form a genuine part of the assembled multitude. The goods secured by a person, such as wealth and health, should be dedicated to the good life of the multitude. Aquinas said that the unity of humanity is brought about by nature but that the unity of the multitude is secured through the ruler.

With this brief review of the Founders and a sampling of the works of Western political theorists in mind, we next examine the attributes of good citizenship.

## The Good Citizen

First, and fundamentally, a good citizen *has a vision of what their country is and what it means*. This vision serves as the basis of the citizen's engagement in the political process and comprises more than merely a safe environment in which they can pursue their private interests and basic human wants. If politics is to be a noble cause in the public interest, the good citizen needs to think creatively and altruistically. Thus, the vision of the country should incorporate values that lead to a better society. We acknowledge that a "better society" is hard to define. However, we argue that as America has expanded the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship to more groups, one criterion of a better society is that it continue that expansion and not unfairly exclude any particular group. An individual will probably carry their vision of what the country means throughout much of their adult life. We maintain that some flexibility, based on life experiences and the fact that America is a country in a state of constant change, is required. The experiences of World War II, the Great Depression, and the Civil Rights movement changed America's role in the world and the role of government at home. Views of America as isolationist or as an inactive government may have been supplanted in the minds of many citizens who recognized the changes that were occurring. The current debate on immigration is a more recent example of an event that has stimulated citizens to think about whether they see their country more or less welcoming of outsiders than they had previously.

Second, the good citizen *is willing to sacrifice their private interests for the public good or, rather, their notion of the public good*. The continual tension between the public and the private, between self-interest and the public or the common good, is a recurring theme in political thought. As one philosopher (Oldenquist, 1986) wrote, society "depends on a social morality which requires small to moderate mutual sacrifices of self-interest, and on extremely rare occasions, considerable sacrifices" (p. 110). Small sacrifices of time, for instance, in order to become knowledgeable about issues or to engage public officials in dialogue would thus seem reasonable. Conversely, becoming cynical and withdrawing from public affairs shows an unwillingness to make even the small sacrifice of time needed to keep the republic functioning.

The preference for the public over the private signifies that members of the community should adopt a public-spiritedness, placing the interests of a larger entity over one's own self-interests. In some respects, this preference for the public would place an abstract distant public interest over the concrete private self-interest. Needless to say, the public interest, as suggested, can be difficult to define. Remote notions of public interest and the public good can easily give way to the more immediate and felt needs of private self-interest in spite of the praise given to the public in political theory and occasionally in political discourse.

Nevertheless, a good citizen wishes to improve the country. Not everyone will agree on how to improve the country, but resolving those differences is the real purpose of politics. Thinking of the public interest can lead to involvement and is part of good citizenship. Former U.S. Senator Bob Graham of Florida wrote that righteous indignation—the feeling of concern over an issue and the realization that democratic institutions at any level of government can address those concerns—is "the launching pad for active citizenship" (Graham & Hand, 2010, pp. 34-35). Graham stated that citizens need to consider whether their feelings of anger or concern could become a political issue. He argued that many people miss the potential for citizen action when they ignore their gut reactions to local issues. Of course, improving the country does not always involve major sacrifice (e.g., recycling), and sacrifice does not always result in improving the country (e.g., being arrested for marching with white supremacists). We argue that the good citizen is ready to sacrifice but is willing to improve the country regardless of whether sacrifice is involved.

Third, a good citizen *is willing to participate in the public domain, especially, the political realm*. Voting is part of this discourse but so is contacting public officials. Former U.S. Representative Lee Hamilton (2004) said that democracy is a process of mutual education, with citizens discussing among themselves and with their elected representatives what they think government should or should not do. When citizens listen to different viewpoints, they come to understand that politicians typically cannot resolve disputes quickly, and they also think beyond their own private interests toward the good of the country and the community. Hamilton said that there is a "magic about democracy": Even when an issue cannot be neatly resolved, healthy dialogue helps citizens live with disagreement and to move on. Hamilton argued that representative democracy rests fundamentally upon informed citizens who understand the essential nature of the system and participate in civic life.

Interestingly, millennials are turning to a new model of engagement, diverting energy from the political realm. This model, according to Russell Dalton (2009) in *The Good Citizen: How a Younger Generation is Reshaping American Politics*, stresses a broader definition of citizenship in which electoral participation is replaced with broader social concerns and an orientation toward activities such as helping people in America or the rest of the world who are worse off than oneself. Similarly, Craig Rimmerman (2011) discussed the "New Citizenship," based on participatory democracy and emphasizing grassroots organizing, mobilization through community building, alliance formation, and self-help. The New Citizenship is reflected in protest politics, the rise of grassroots citizen organizations, and service-based learning (Rimmerman, 2011).

As important as this "engaged citizenship" model is, representative democracy depends on citizens who also are engaged in politics. We applaud this development that engages young citizens in efforts to improve society since it is in line with one of our principles of good citizenship. We note, however, as Rimmerman (2011) explained in his criticism of service-learning, that service-learning may fail to provide "the everyday connections to the political process" that citizens must have. For example, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) examined two high school courses: one course stressed participatory citizenship, with students working on local problems, such as recycling, and making contacts with local agencies to achieve a particular goal; the other course stressed social justice, with students studying the root causes of certain problems in the community and seeking solutions. While students developed different skills and perspectives in each course (i.e., technocratic and leadership skills in the participatory course and critical analysis in the social justice class) both were incomplete. It seems to us that both courses suggest that citizens need to take a broader view (have a vision as we stated earlier) and have the skills needed to work not just on a particular problem but also to become involved in politics in an effort to influence policy and improve society. Citizens must still do the nuts and bolts work of representative democracy, nationally and locally in their communities, as part of the other facets of the New Citizenship to achieve lasting results through changes in policy.

Fourth, the good citizen *maintains his or her right to respectfully dissent and to critique the policies of those in power, and recognizes the difference between country and policy or country and a particular president*. In light of the current political polarization in the United States, a closely related point is that good citizens also *respect the right of others to hold opposing views even when they are not necessarily convinced that the opposing views are the best course for the country*. Thus, good citizens recognize that they are not in sole possession of the truth and therefore must try to understand the motivations of those holding opposing views. This is especially true in governing or in any collaborative effort in which compromise with opposing viewpoints is crucial. In the electoral arena, forcefully opposing others' viewpoints is expected. We also are not saying here that that all views are equally valid or worthy of respect. Examples would include arguments that target specific racial or religious groups or views that seem generally unethical. This fourth principle follows from the first principle described earlier—dissent and disagreement are based on one's view of what the country should be. John Stuart Mill (1956), a British political writer from the 19th century, asserted that society should not silence dissent. The worst offense in public discourse is to stigmatize as bad or immoral those who hold a contrary opinion. Ideally, public discussion does not involve slandering opponents but rather representing their views honestly (Mill, 1956). If politics is to be discourse, such as Kane (1998) advocated, then a thinking patriotism, ready to question but willing to give some benefit of the doubt to elected leaders and willing to try to understand the reasonable views of others, may be a good approach.

## Political Polarization

The ongoing indications of political polarization, such as the inter-party debates (some might call it squabbling) over almost every policy proposal, demonstrate that the parties continue to struggle to work together in order to enact policies. While not surprising, the party quarrels should be of concern to the citizenry to the extent that they interfere with sound policy making and with addressing the nation's problems. Political polarization, at least as practiced by elected representatives, is not good citizenship. As discussed previously, the willingness to sacrifice the private in favor of the public is, we argue, a fundamental tenet of good citizenship. In the halls of Congress, polarization manifests itself in the clash of two views of the public good, Democratic and Republican, with each side wanting its view to reign supreme and evidently placing little value on compromise.

Recent studies by the Pew Center (2014) and scholars Mann and Ornstein (2013, 2016) and Abramowitz (2010, 2016) have identified several sources of political polarization. These include the separation f the electorate into red and blue states, and the tendency for politicians to appeal to the electoral bases of their parties which can be more extreme and less willing to compromise. As E. J. Dionne (2015) of the *Washington Post* stated in a recent column on why many people miss the late former New York Senator Pat Moynihan, the profound disagreements that Americans have with one another are intellectual, moral, partisan, and ideological. To borrow from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, "the fault … is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

As indicated earlier, politics, particularly in the view of the ancient philosophers, is supposed to be a noble calling. Decisions are made for the benefit of society, policy emerges, problems are addressed, and the nation advances. In this age of political polarization, however, politics has broken down amid policy formulation by executive order instead of legislation, threats of government shutdown, and talk of stripping the president of executive authority.

Admittedly, forceful political debate and discussion can be useful in an election cycle, when candidates and their ideas and are presented to the electorate for evaluation. This process is a useful part of politics as ideas are evaluated and then selected or cast aside—although even in the electoral cycle, politics has become increasingly negative, perhaps due in part to the increased polarization of the electorate.

However, when polarization interferes with governing, it can harm democracy, resulting not only in the inability to form policies to address national problems, but also in political dysfunction and an attendant loss of optimism among the electorate. For this reason, polarization is not good citizenship. In her book *Fighting for Common Ground*, former U.S. Senator of Maine Olympia Snowe (2013) wrote about the need for moderate legislators who seek to achieve bipartisan solutions to problems. Snowe also stated that legislators must not only present their own views, but also listen to how the other side is responding to those views. For Snowe, the current state of polarization is putting America's greatness at risk.

One may argue with the constitutional system that the Founders put in place. For example, in *Statecraft as Soulcraft: What Government Does*, George Will

(1983) argued that the U.S. constitutional system is based on a flawed tenet of self-interested individuals joining together in a political community. Modern politics defines the public good as the aggregate of the results of the pursuit of private interests. In the Madisonian system, the solution to factions pursuing their own interests consisted of other countervailing factions pursuing their own interests. However, for Will, the result is that the collective sense of citizenship, of a shared fate, has become "thin gruel" (Will, 1983, p. 45; see also Will's discussion in Chapter 2, "The Defect," pp. 25-46). Others, however, have contended that the constitutional system is not flawed and that the Framers wisely channeled human self-interest in hopes of obtaining compromises (Lane & Oreskes, 2007).

However one may feel about the merits of the constitutional system, it is unquestionable that the Founders placed a great responsibility on those in government to do their public duty. After any election is over, legislators need to tamp down the angry feelings they may have expressed toward the other side on the campaign trail, and get to work governing in the public interest. Of course, that means, as Senator Snowe recognized, that each side will not achieve everything that it wants. Yet, as classic rockers Stephen Stills and Buffalo Springfield said in their 1967 song "For What It's Worth," "nobody's right if everybody's wrong."

**The Role of Education**

One of the main purposes of higher education and education generally should be to promote good citizenship. In doing so, educators engender attitudes in their students that lead potentially to long-term active citizenship and political participation. We recall Kane's (1998) point that though politics is necessary for a flourishing existence, one must practice it to get good at it. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) noted that education embodies ideas about what good citizenship is and what good citizens do. They concluded that the participatory citizen is one who is prepared to work in collective, community-based efforts, while the justice-oriented citizen is prepared to analyze and understand the interplay between social, economic, and political forces in society.

Our principles of good citizenship suggest various topics for educators to consider while embodying a view of citizens as active, creative, and thoughtful. Helping students to form a vision of the United States would require discussion of the history of America and the different views of citizenship that have been dominant in different eras. The expansion of full citizenship rights to African Americans and women, and the continuing struggles of groups, such as gay Americans, to achieve those rights would be a focus of discussion for helping students to foster a vision of America that frames their participation in the political sphere.

Hillary Shulman (2015) offered one view on how educators might promote political participation, including discussion and promoting respect for others' views, among their students. Shulman argued that millennial disengagement from politics should be approached from a communication perspective. Educators should promote political talk among students and promote political efficacy—which is important for life-long political participation—by explaining issues and topics in a language that can be understood by students whose knowledge of particular topics may be limited.

We also argue that in promoting political talk and issue discussion, educators should expose their students to the diversity of political viewpoints in society, even the "fringe" viewpoints. Such exposure should help to lessen the political polarization that threatens to cripple politics. Students need to be aware of the complexity of issues and, at the same time, respect those who hold opposing viewpoints. Educators need to promote respectful political dialogue and help students form their own opinions while realizing that compromise with others is an essential part of politics. Promoting more cooperation and joint efforts among student political groups may be one option in helping students to appreciate that opposing political views also have merit. The important point is that educators must communicate the message that politics and governing should not be zero-sum and that opposing sides must be able to work together to shape public policy. There is an old saying that politics is the art of compromise. Students should certainly stand up forcefully for their values and beliefs; however, in today's environment, as America changes and becomes more diverse, students need to learn (and educators need to teach them) how to work with people with diverging viewpoints and to recognize that each side has something to contribute. Responsible citizenship involves avoiding arrogance when one's side wins or being a graceful loser, and then moving on to the next issue.

As mentioned earlier, service-learning is an important part of the New Citizenship. Service-learning classes could be used to discuss the sacrifice required by citizens on behalf of the country if the discussion encompasses more than just the specific project or goal that is the focus of the class. We believe that educators could use students' desire to solve problems or become involved in the community as a starting point for encouraging students to engage more actively in politics. Educators could link a particular service project to a larger policy that would be the subject of political participation. For example, students could concentrate on a controversial local issue, researching and presenting the opposing viewpoints and trying to determine if compromise can be reached, at least in the class, among the different positions. The class members could encourage compromise while not unduly sacrificing the principles they represent individually. This exercise would be helpful in encouraging respect of different viewpoints and mitigating (or avoiding) polarization in the governing process. Rimmerman (2011) noted that courses should allow students to think as public citizens, linking classroom discussions with concerns in the larger society. In line with our view that a good citizen controls the temptation to favor more immediate private interests over remote public interests, Rimmerman maintained that students need opportunities to connect to the larger public sphere, where they will spend much of their lives, to counter the tendency to think in highly private ways.

## Conclusion

The bitter presidential election of 2016 showed just how polarized the nation has become. A Pew Center (2017) survey conducted in early January 2017, shortly before President Trump's inauguration, showed that 86% of respondents described the country as more politically divided than in the past. In addition, most survey respondents expected the polarization to continue under Trump: 40% expected the country to be about as politically divided in five years, 31% thought it will be even more divided, and 24% less divided. Actions taken by both sides, including questioning the legitimacy of Trump's presidency, the flurry of moves by Trump in the early days of his administration, and the responses to those presidential actions, illustrate the polarization. To us, these findings and events show how important it is to the well-being of our representative democracy for educators and particularly political scientists to promote respectful dialogue and place the common good above the interests of party and interest groups. Teachers and political scientists should take the lead in efforts to change public perceptions of compromise as weak and principled politics as necessarily adversarial and polarizing. With the Trump administration (or any administration for that matter) initiating policies that are bound to be controversial, it is vital that discussion be civil and dissent be constructive in order for the nation to progress. Civil discourse and constructive, respectful dissent are the foundation of active, creative, and thoughtful citizenship. Such citizenship, we argue, is crucial to keeping the republic, as Franklin said, and to fulfilling the vision of the Framers of the nation's representative democracy.

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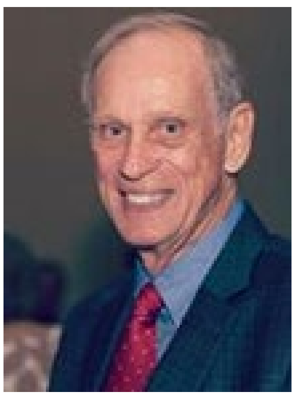

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