

The Often-Forgotten Diversity: How Faculty can help Limited Income-First Generation Students Succeed

Abstract

What often gets lost in higher education equity and inclusion conversations is the highest correlated variable with academic achievement, socio-economic status. Low-income students are four times more likely to drop out of college as compared to their more affluent peers (Pell Institute, 2011). This symposium provides an overview of the unique challenges facing the 6.2 million students classified as limited income, first-generation (LIFG), programs to help them, and how faculty are in a unique position to help LIFG students succeed. The session will focus on sharing actionable items that individual faculty can implement to help LIFG students thrive.

Three Keywords: First Gen, Limited income students, student success

The Often-Forgotten Diversity: How Faculty can help Limited Income-First Generation Students Succeed

Introduction

Higher education institutions have made great strides over the years in expanding access to more racially and ethnically diverse students, and these institutions and the faculty who teach within them realize the societal and educational benefits of this diversity (Espinosa et al, 2019). However, what often gets lost in the conversation of diversity and inclusion in higher education, is socio-economic diversity and providing a more inclusive environment for students of limited means. In the United States, 6.2 million students (approximately 30% of all US undergraduate students) are classified as limited income, first-generation (LIFG) students (NASFAA, 2021). With the decline in overall students attending college in the United States, recent changes to college and university rankings to include social mobility, and colleges and universities committed to increasing diversity, LIFG students represent an important population to many higher education institutions (Greenwald, 2012; Morse & Brooks, 2021). However, the road to academic success is much more difficult for these students with only 11% of LIFG students obtaining a degree within six years and a dropout rate almost five times (54%) higher than that of their higher-income second-generation peers (Pell Institute, 2011). This symposium seeks to help faculty understand the unique challenges that LIFG students face that faculty may not be aware of and actions that individual faculty members can take to help LIFG students improve their chances for degree attainment and academic success.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias (2012) proposed that cultural mismatch theory, where individual performance is contingent on whether people experience a match or a mismatch between their own cultural norms and the norms within a given setting,

may help explain why LIFG students struggle in university settings. Their studies found that American Universities are grounded in middle- and upper-class cultural norms and rules of the game that are not familiar to LIFG students and this mismatch may undermine LIFG student performance. Cultural mismatch theory may help explain the consistency in research findings that even after taking into account demographic background, enrollment characteristics, and academic preparation, LIFG students are less likely to graduate than their more privileged peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Limited income, first-generation (LIFG) students struggle in four major areas: financial, academic, professional, and psychological (Banks-Santilli, 2015). College and university programs designed to assist LIFG students usually focus on these first two areas, offering resources to help overcome economic constraints and remedial courses to help LIFG students overcome achievement gaps resulting from feeder high school programs that do not offer high level math or advanced placement courses (Stephens, Hamedani & Destin, 2014). Often overlooked by faculty and administrators are the professional and psychological challenges that FGLI students face. This symposium explores all four dimensions, but will primarily focus professional and psychological challenges and what faculty can do to help LIFG students overcome these challenges, more fully benefit from their college experience, and successfully complete their degree.

Symposia / Panel Overview.

This symposium will start with a brief demographic overview of the 6.2 million limited income, first-generation students and the unique challenges that make the road to academic success much more difficult. Low-income, also known as limited income, students are those who come from families with annual incomes in the lowest 20% nationally (around \$40,000), or

below 200% of the federal poverty line (NASFAA, 2021). These students are disproportionately from race and ethnic minority backgrounds and have less academic preparation, but they are also more likely to be older, receive less financial support from their parents, and have multiple obligations outside of college, like dependents and work that limit their participation in the college experience (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

In this session, we will talk briefly about programs colleges and universities provide that help address the financial and academic preparation issues LIFG students face. The symposium will focus on the professional and psychological challenges LIFG students face that many faculty may not be aware of and what faculty can do to help LIFG students succeed. Professional challenges include the lack of social contacts and role models to help LIFG students take advantage of available opportunities, network effectively, and build a professional presence as compared to their more affluent peers (Engel & Tinto, 2008; Banks-Santilli, 2015). These professional challenges show themselves in the differences in attitudes LIFG students have towards academic support opportunities. While most students “feel entitled” to academic and emotional support, first-generation students may feel guilty about taking advantage of resources (Pappano, 2015). Psychological challenges, including stigmas associated with their LIFG status and conflicting identities of family membership and educational mobility, also handicap LIFG students (Orbe, 2004; London, 1989). Many LIFG students express concerns that if faculty or other students know their identity their academic ability, achievement, and performance may be underestimated or their right to be on campus questioned (Banks-Santilli, 2015), another instance of imposter syndrome (Clance & Imes, 1978). Adding to these psychological challenges, with their histories of self-sufficiency and staring down obstacles, many LIFG students view seeking

help as a sign of failure, and LIFG students express difficulty explaining their college experience to parents, limiting psychological support for these students (Pappano, 2015).

Most faculty teaching in business school classrooms today, have advanced degrees and come from more affluent backgrounds than their LIFG students. This may create blind spots and incorrect assumptions about LIFG students due to a lack of understanding their home environment and lived experiences. Many MOBTS participants are champions for diversity on their campuses, which should be applauded, but the diversity conversation on many campuses focuses on racial, ethnic, gender, or LGBTQ equity and inclusion at the expense of socio-economic diversity. Although ensuring an equitable and inclusive environment for these students is important and, in many cases, intersects with socio-economic status, academic achievement and degree attainment is more highly correlated with income level than any other diversity category (Engle & Tinto, 2008). This symposium looks to inform participants of the issues LIFG students face and then have an open discussion and brainstorming session on implementable solutions to help these students overcome challenges, attain their degree, and thrive.

Session Description

We suggest a session duration of 60 minutes. The breakdown of how we will use our time is shown in the following table:

Activity	Time
Introduction of Facilitators and Session	5 Minutes
Overview of research and demographics on limited income-first generation (LIFG) students and issues they face	10 minutes
Overview of current programs to help support LIFG students	15 minutes
Discussion and Idea Exchange (Will do a World Café set up if a large audience)	25 minutes
Wrap Up & Closing	5 minutes

Total Time	60 Minutes
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Introduction

The session will start with an introduction of the facilitators and their extensive experiences working with LIFG students as teachers and administrators, and experience being a LIFG student. If the group is small, we will ask participants to introduce themselves and their experience with LIFG students.

Overview of Who LIFG student are, their challenges and University programs

The symposium will open with a short presentation on characteristics of LIFG students, the challenges they face, and the growing importance of LIFG students to the university success. We will also spend about 15 minutes discussing current programs used to help LIFG students. This time will be split between talking about the types of programs at the university level designed to help LIFG students including establishing food pantries, having summer programs to provide remedial assistance to close academic gaps, and financial assistance, and changes schools can make to help LIFG students. These changes can include having students space classes to allow for “study hall” time during days they are on campus, having spaces for students to study near faculty offices to encourage faculty-student interactions, and why LIFG students may not purchase textbooks and how to help them.

Discussion and Idea Exchange

After establishing the context, all participants will be invited to share their experiences with LIFG students and the types of programs, interventions, and teaching modifications that can help LIFG students succeed. If the group is small, we will have an open group discussion. If enough participants attend the session, we will use two 10-minute round table (World Café

format) sessions with each facilitator to discuss following types of interventions faculty can participate in to help LIFG students and to identify best practices to share with the larger group:

- University level programs to help LIFG students
- How faculty can advocate for LIFG students among their colleagues and university administrations to address their unique needs.
- Changes to courses and teaching methods individual faculty can implement .
- Other ways faculty can help LIFG students

Wrap Up and Closing

The session will end with the facilitators summarizing key learnings and action items faculty can implement to help LIFG students succeed.

Conference Theme Track

This session should be considered for the “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” Conference Theme Track. This symposium explores challenges and issues related to the most relevant demographic factor in determining student degree attainment, socio-economic status. This session addresses how individual faculty members can better understand the challenges LIFG students face, the instructor’s own biases, and strategies to help make classrooms and schools more equitable and inclusive for LIFG students to increase their chances for success. Student income disparities are not often talked about in DEI conversations on campuses, but we feel MOBTS is the perfect venue to highlight this issue and develop actionable strategies to help LIFG students succeed.

Unique Contribution

This work has not been presented at MOBTS or elsewhere.

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