

Faculty Research Grant Final Report: Project First-Gen

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Restatement of problem researched or creative activity

The primary purpose of the project was to pilot an online intervention for first-generation college students with first-generation students at Arkansas Tech University. The study examined the types of concerns ATU first-generation students expressed, as well as their perceptions of the efficacy of the intervention for improving their college success. The research team will use information gained from this pilot to conduct a larger-scale, experimental trial of the intervention's efficacy in the 2015-2016 academic year.

Brief review of the research procedure utilized

After recruitment and consent, participants completed a pretest survey (including measures of demographics, academic success, academic motivation, self-efficacy for academic and social success, and feelings of belonging in the university. Participants were then, for the duration of the semester, encouraged to read about the experience of first-generation college students who have successfully completed their undergraduate degrees (graduate student bloggers), and post questions, which were answered by bloggers and/or the research team. At the end of the semester, participants were asked to complete a posttest that included the same measures as the pretest, plus a survey about their experiences with the intervention web site.

Summary of findings

The most important findings from the pilot study are not research results, but valuable experience with recruitment and study logistics that will make the scale-up project, in the next academic year, run much more smoothly. We experienced much more difficulty with recruitment than anticipated and so ended up with a much smaller sample size than originally planned. The small sample size turned out to be a benefit, as it allowed for some trial and error to develop the most efficient systems possible to keep up with participants, research team

member, and data. We have plans to improve the recruitment process for the next wave, primarily by reaching out to potential participants in a more personal way and broadening the pool of potential participants from freshman only to include all first-generation undergraduates.

Although data has not yet been analyzed, it is expected to provide a picture of first-generation students at ATU – how they feel about their college experiences, their academic and social success, and the types of information they seek out when opportunities to ask questions are provided.

Conclusions and recommendations

Current plans call for submission of at least two poster presentations to national professional conferences. I will first-author a poster that provides a descriptive analysis of first-generation ATU students, based on pretest data. A second poster (authored by my collaborator) will provide a case study analysis of four participants' growth from pretest to posttest. A possible third poster will examine trends in the types of questions posted to the intervention web site.

More importantly, this pilot study has fulfilled its purpose of preparing the research team to conduct a larger-scale experimental trial of the intervention's effectiveness in the 2015-2016 academic year. We look forward to continuing this line of research and determining if this relatively low-resource intervention can make a difference in the lives of first-generation college students.