

2017

A Retrospective Illustrative Case Study on the Barriers Facing First Generation College Students and How a Targeted Program Ameliorates these Barriers

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Recommended Citation

Kosydar, Samuel (2017) "A Retrospective Illustrative Case Study on the Barriers Facing First Generation College Students and How a Targeted Program Ameliorates these Barriers," *International Journal of Undergraduate Community Engagement*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/ijuce/vol1/iss2/1>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18122/B2PS3W>

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Cover Page Footnote

The author would like to thank Christina Yokoyama, Director of NTSAF, for her support and guidance in addition to all the Topping Scholars for their enthusiasm and commitment.

Introduction

The Norman Topping Student Aid Fund (NTSAF) is a scholarship program at the University of Southern California (USC) for first generation college students with high financial need. Most importantly, NTSAF serves as a retention program through the services it offers. NTSAF was established by students in 1970 to ensure that the local community around USC, southern Los Angeles, was better reflected in the study body; the NTSAF is fully funded by the student body through a required semester fee. While NTSAF continues to give priority to local community members, students now hail from across the United States. The author was involved in NTSAF for three years (2011-2014), serving as Chairperson of the Governing Board from 2012-2014.

This paper aims to elucidate the specific challenges facing first generation students through the observed experiences of NTSAF recipients (Topping Scholars) and how NTSAF has developed strategies to reduce barriers affecting these students. The intersection of 1) socioeconomic status, 2) cultural capital, 3) race, and 4) gender creates a particularly unique and demanding environment for first generation college students to navigate. As chairperson, I helped manage the logistics of NTSAF and in doing so discovered the personal impact this program has had on improving the quality of life through education and uplifting the dignity and self-respect of students as they transitioned from a background of relative poverty to becoming college graduates.

Discussion

Affect of Socioeconomic Status

The operationalization of first generation college status as a valid measure for familial socioeconomic status is tentative, but studies have shown that first generation families are more represented in the lowest and middle quartiles of income compared to non-first generation families (Nunez & Cuccaro Alamin, 1998). NTSAF emphasizes recruitment from zip codes around the University Park and Health Science campuses, where the medium income is \$33,580 compared to the national average of \$53,889 as seen in Figure 1 (United States Bureau of Census, 2017).

Beyond the rising cost of tuition, financially disadvantaged students struggle also with surmounting less noticeable obstacles ranging from the cost of food on campus to basic bedding not supplied by campus housing. For example, over the course of three years the author observed Topping Scholars eating on campus less frequently than peers due to the higher pricing of campus food, which forces lower income students to dine in more affordable locations. NTSAF has sought to counter this general disadvantage by providing at most \$5,500 per year for undergraduate Topping Scholars, which is additional to USC financial aid and merit scholarships (Norman Topping Student Aid Fund). Moreover, funding is provided to Topping Scholars, on a competitive basis, for study abroad

opportunities, conference presentations, and other academic activities that would otherwise be unattainable without financial assistance. A primary aim of this community-centered program is to ensure that first generation college students can fully access the advantages of the university. As chairperson, the author reviewed funding requests and recalls enabling students who had never flown before with the financial resources to travel abroad on an airplane for their first time. In general, NTSAF resources are well utilized by Topping Scholars.

Affect of Social Capital

Social capital, defined as the value that an individual receives for being part of a social structure, has been linked to academic success and better employment opportunities (Coleman, 1990, p. 300; Valenzuela & Dornsbuch, 1994; Seibert et al., 2001). First generation students may not have the same awareness of the college process, internships, and professional development compared to peers whose parents have attended college. NTSAF realizes these barriers exist and has two full time staff that serve as a crucial resource to connect students to academic advising, counseling, and career guidance. The author worked closely with these staff members and quickly realized how essential they are for student success because they help form a community for the Topping Scholars. When classes or home life is in disarray, students can turn to the staff; when emergency financial situations arise, students can turn to the staff to see if any additional funding is available; when unforeseen challenges come up, students can always talk with the staff.

In addition, NTSAF has hosted seminars on campus resources and brings all Topping Scholars on an annual retreat where they have the opportunity to personally engage with university staff associated with departments such as Career Services and Student Affairs. A faculty member supportive of NTSAF has even offered freshman seminar courses specifically designed for first generation students. NTSAF serves as a nexus between Topping Scholars and access to university resources.

Race

First generation college students are more likely to be minorities and this is no exception at NTSAF (Engle, 2007). An observed sense of stigmatization was evident not necessarily in policy but in social acceptance on campus, which is exacerbated by the fact that first generation students in general tend to report a weaker sense of belonging and higher depressive scores (Stebelton et al., 2014). Some Topping Scholars expressed “not feeling American” until they visited Japan on a NTSAF planned trip to expose first generation college students to other cultures. NTSAF designed special events like the Japan trip as well as the annual retreat to bring together Topping Scholars in part to foster a cohesive and inclusive community, as it has been shown that peer support positively affects

academic performance (Dennis et al., 2005). In part, the aim of these NTSAF programs is to effectuate a network of social support to promote retention.

Gender

While factors such as income, social and cultural capital in addition to race may particularly affect the first generation college experience, so too can gender. Familial and cultural expectations may affect student performance, serving as positive or even detrimental forces (Tseng, 2004; Lopez, 2001). Several students expressed frustration due to a lack of parental support for their academic career. Particularly, several female students had said their parents wished they were married and working instead of in school incurring debt. Yet, studies have also found that parents positively contribute to first generation success, so the author's observations should be noted in context and with regards to a lack of experimental verification (Lopez, 2001). Nevertheless these observations serve to illustrate how cultural expectations such as marriage may create further stressors. Moreover, the lack of female representation in majors such as the physical sciences and engineering can make it more difficult for female students to feel welcome, and this is especially challenging for female first generation college students who may also encounter the previously described barriers.

Current Barriers

Certainly NTSAF has made tremendous strides in ensuring that local community members are represented at USC and providing a nurturing environment for first generation college students, but further steps can be taken to improve on its mission. Topping Scholars are not guaranteed a debt free education and the undergraduate student is expected to finish a degree in nine semesters, although additional funding may be available in extenuating circumstances. NTSAF is also highly selective due to staffing and resource constraints, so not all first generation college students with high financial need who come to USC receive the Topping Scholarship. Hopefully as the university continues to grow its endowment, it will be able to provide all its students facing barriers with the same resources afforded to Topping Scholars.

Reflection

An analysis of how NTSAF specifically addresses barriers facing first generation college students is informative but does not capture the emotional and personal impact the scholarship has had on both its students and staff, including the author. Many of the students faced challenges that cannot be summarized by a simple poverty statistic; from overcoming neighborhood violence to enduring homelessness. These are not experiences that are left at home once college life begins. How does one reconcile past hardship, such as negligent foster care, with effusive support now offered by NTSAF? I'm reminded of Sandra Benítez's novel *The Weight of All Things* as an apt revelation that current circumstances are

inseparable from the historical forces that shape them—bygone burdens or achievements influence our perspective (Benitez, 2002). This is no more apparent than at NTSAF graduation; the momentous climb from a position of relative poverty to college graduate evokes strong emotions, including tears. Certainly having a college degree directly affects earning potential but what I also witnessed was a tremendous boost to self-respect and self-esteem. I came to realize that NTSAF is not simply a retention program but a means to uplift the dignity of those who experience severe disadvantages. NTSAF has furthered my resolve to promote higher education as a way to increase the social mobility of first generation college students.

Conclusion and Future Study

As shown in this case study, first generation college students must combat an array of obstacles including financial, sociocultural capital, race, and gender barriers. However, NTSAF has demonstrated that these factors can be reduced with the commitment of targeted resources and community support. Additional analysis is required to quantitatively determine the efficacy of resource allocation. Moreover, this illustrative case study examined a private university with a very unique program. However, further studies are needed to analyze how public institutions with more limited funding are able to assist first generation college students.

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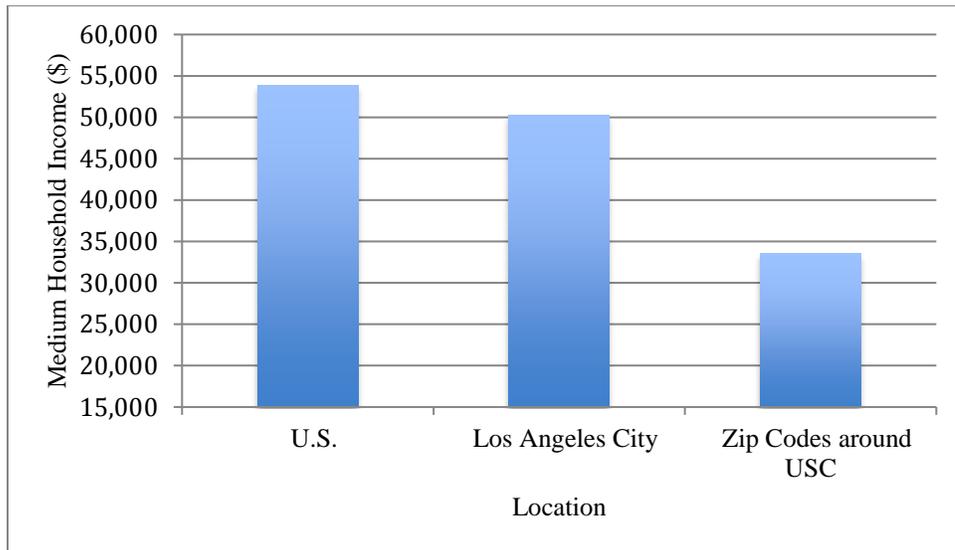


Figure 1. Medium Household Income from 2011-2015 American Community Survey.