



How Can I Help?

First Generation Students + Non-Profits= Success

By Jamarl D. Clark, AEAP Program Assistant

Where are all the first-generation minority students who participate in community outreach? Volunteer program coordinators want to know. Many non-profits are curious to discover methods that allow them to reach out to this sometimes forgotten population. In order to address this issue, we must recognize that which differentiates first-generation college students from other demographics are the challenges they may face in relation to becoming more active in community outreach and methods of support for the student.

Financial Burden

First generation students are defined as students whose parents have not earned a bachelors degree. These students often deal with many obstacles such as financial barriers that prevent them from participating in volunteer programs like ours. Dr. Shaun Harper, University of Pennsylvania, Assistant Professor, suggests that while in college, first generation students face financial road blocks that may limit them from being civically engaged. Research shows that two-thirds of low income students are also first generation. (Harper, 244) Did you know that the Federal Pell Grant only covers one third of tuition for low-income students attending public four-year colleges (it used to cover almost 100 percent), and states are beginning to invest public money in merit-based (rather than need-based) aid that disproportionately benefits middle and upper income students.(Hillman 2007) First generation students whose financial aid packages are lacking must balance academia and a job in order to successfully complete their education at their chosen institution.

Experiences

Often first-generation students who are unfamiliar with college life may need a stronger support network on campus. Such a network would give first-generation students a place to go for advice, making the college experience smaller and more manageable. Parents with degrees are beneficial to their child, sharing knowledge of the college experience. First generation students experience a lack of support and understanding from family. As a first-generation college student myself, I recall not being able to turn to anyone in my family to ask the question: How was college? Experiences are worth a thousand words, because sometimes the unknown can be an obstacle to a first generation student.

There is HOPE

During my year of service as an AmeriCorps*VISTA, I served on the Next Generation North Carolina task force. As a member of the task force I was given the duty to form focus group(s) to learn about the experiences of first generation/minority students at their respective campuses. I discussed with first generation/minority students how being engaged in the community has

contributed to their success thus far in their college career. In my findings students answered questions that centered around their experiences and how service has been a contributing factor of their success. When students in the focus group were asked the question: Do you think service and academics are connected? One student stated that “Definitely, I volunteered at a public school for three years and felt it is important to give back because giving money is not possible.” Also, the students in the focus group felt it was essential to go back to the community and encourage other first generations students to attend college. This exemplifies to volunteer programs and non-profits that the seed has been placed in first generation students to do service; they just need the seed to be watered by the support of organizations. There is hope!

Non-Profit Tips:

- You can create a partnership with your nearest higher education institutes and stress to students and parents the importance of service and the connection with success.
- Attend Career Fairs and Service Events to let students know about the work you and your volunteers are doing.
- Look at your community demographics, if you see a high number of potential first generation/low income youth; make it a point to target that group through activities such as tutoring, mentoring, and workshops. Don't forget to include the parents.
- If you have first generation student volunteers use them as spokespersons for your organizations. They represent hope and that the impossible is possible! Have first generation student volunteers conduct orientations that reach out to other first generations students. Encourage the first generation student volunteer to share their experiences.
- Always pose the question to the first generation college student: How can I help you to be successful?

There is much more research needed to properly assess the potential for non-profits to support active community outreach for first generation students. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, “everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.” First generation students have the potential to make an impact. It is now our time as volunteer programs to water that seed those is sown into them and watch them bloom into successful citizens.

Citation Highly Recommended Reading:

Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. J. (Eds.). (2009). *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations*. New York: Routledge.

Hillman, N. (2007). *Challenges for first-generation college students*. The Roosevelt Institution. Retrieved on June 5, 2009 from <http://blog.rooseveltinstitution.org/2007/12/05/challenges-for-first-generation-college-students/>

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