

First-Generation Student Engagement in Orientation

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper explores a case study on first-generation college students and their level of engagement at Florida State University. The researcher explored varying levels of student engagement by comparing two specific groups: first-generation college students who served as orientation leaders within New Student and Family Programs and first-generation college students who did not serve as orientation leaders and instead may have been involved in other areas of campus. Literature has shown a relationship between students who feel a stronger connection to the institution and their ability to persist and graduate (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008). This study will seek to determine what kind of relationship exists between first-generation college students involved as orientation leaders compared with first-generation college students who did not serve as orientation leaders. Through interviews and focus groups, the researcher determined that first-generation college students who served as orientation leaders within New Student and Family Programs had a greater level of attachment to Florida State University and became more deeply engaged on campus compared to other students.

*Keywords:* first-generation college student, student engagement, orientation, involvement

## First-Generation Student Engagement in Orientation

**INTRODUCTION**

First-generation students enrolling in institutions of higher learning have increased in number significantly over the past decade (Strayhorn, 2006). Research has been conducted and focused on different areas of study for first-generation college students. According to Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) three main areas exist for research related to first-generation college students: college preparation and demographics; transition; and retention and persistence (p. 249-250). Unlike previous work conducted by Pascarella et al., the researcher in this study will focus on exploring first-generation college students' engagement with orientation programming and the development, as well as the impact the experience has on the students at a four-year, public institution, specifically Florida State University. More specifically, the researcher aims to compare first-generation college students involved in the orientation program with other first-generation college students who are not involved as orientation leaders. The study will provide opportunity for readers to determine the level of impact on first-generation college students as they navigate their attention and focus on different organizations and involvement. Tinto (2010) also provides a good reflection for the present study by discussing how the "impact of involvement on student outcomes is not simply a reflection of the degree of involvement, but how those involvements or engagements lead to forms of valued social and academic membership and the 'sense of belonging' they engender" and the "meaning students attach to their involvement" that results in whether a student decides to leave or stay at an institution (p. 71-72). Understanding the level of engagement for first-generation students, especially, is important because it will provide readers the opportunity to uncover the challenges and result of the decisions they make. Many offices in the Division of Student Affairs at Florida

State University may provide a positive experience that leads to enhanced development for first-generation college students. The researcher will look specifically at students engaged as Orientation Leaders in New Student and Family Programs within the Dean of Students.

The researcher finds student engagement to be a valuable and important outcome to spend time and resources to study because data needs to be produced on how first-generation college students develop after engaging in programming related to orientation and the first-year experience, given the students are the first in their family to be attending and experiencing college. The primary goal in assessing this particular outcome will be researching the student-level outcome and secondly, the program-level outcome. The focus will be on the development of the student with a side effect of understanding how student engagement is impacted by the specific program, in this case New Student and Family Programs. It is also important to note that ‘first-generation college student’ can mean that these students may come from families in which their parents are American citizens, whose parents are permanent residents, and whose family is undocumented. This is important to recognize and understand the experiences for each population of first-generation students have the capacity to be very different depending on what the fixed inputs and demographic characteristics the student may have upon entering college. For the purpose of this research study, the focus will specifically be on first-generation college students who are the first in their family to attend college, regardless of legal or immigration status, unless otherwise noted in the research study.

The purpose of this outcomes assessment is to measure the development for first-generation students who exhibit a high level of student engagement on campus. More specifically, the researcher would like to determine the relationship between first-generation college students involved in orientation programming on campus compared to first-generation

students who are not involved as orientation leaders. One way the researcher plans to assess the engagement, development, and impact of their experiences is by conducting interviews with first-generation students who currently serve as orientation leaders and first-generation students who have not spent any amount of time with New Student and Family Programs. In order to provide a comparison, the researcher will meet with students in their first semester of college for a preliminary interview to track their progress. During the spring semester, the researcher will touch base with interviewed students in the fall and reach out to New Student and Family Programs to interview additional orientation leaders. Finally, the researcher will conduct a concluding interview after the orientation experience in the summer or subsequent semester. The methodology used to conduct these interviews is based off Chaddock's (2013) model on oral history. This will best illustrate and provide voice to the experiences of the individuals the researcher interacts with, allowing their story to be shared and experienced firsthand by readers of this study.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For the purpose of this study, the researcher will use a qualitative methods approach. The methodology will use purposive sampling, focusing on a set of five first-generation college students involved as orientation leaders within New Student and Family Programs and another set of five first-generation college students at Florida State University who were not involved as orientation leaders. The purpose of this assessment is to determine the impact of student engagement within the particular program. The researcher will conduct this study utilizing a modified version of the oral history lens adapted from Chaddock (2013) in order to better study the individuals and how their experiences compared based on their involvement with orientation

programming. The population studied will be first-generation students in a large, public four-year institution – specifically at Florida State University. Furthermore, the assessment process will include various methods for measuring the impact of students' experience in the orientation program compared with other first-generation students who did not participate as orientation leaders.

The researcher will first reach out to the New Student and Family Programs staff in order to identify first generation college students and inform them of the intent and purpose of the present study. Upon receiving permission, the identified orientation leaders will be contacted via email to respond to a brief survey that will serve to screen the prospective participants and seek their consent to partake in the research study. The researcher will also identify and contact first-generation students not involved with the orientation program. It must be noted, however, these students may also be high-achieving in their own respects. The contact information will be gathered through purposive and snowball sampling and the population will be made aware of the study. The Florida State University data will be collected by creating two specific focus groups of first-generation college students – one group that is or has served as an orientation leader and the other group that has not. There will be interviews conducted once the two groups have been finalized. Before proceeding forward with the interview of each student in the two groups, the researcher will pretest the questions to make sure they are conversational and sufficient, reliable and valid. Additionally, information will be collected through email correspondence, in-person interactions, hand-written notes during in-person meetings, and electronic recordings via an iPad Mini and iPhone 5S devices. Once the recordings have been captured, the researcher will transcribe, code, and make meaning of the content in order to be able to fully share the story and experience of the individuals involved in the present study.

**About Florida State University**

Florida State University is a large, public, research institution in the Southeast region of the United States with more than 40,000 students and is located in the capital city of Tallahassee, Florida. The institution is predominantly white with a majority female population and contains a significant first-generation college student population.

**Participants**

First-generation students will be selected as participants from Florida State University using purposive sampling and the snowballing or referral method. The students will consist of five individuals who are or have been involved with New Student and Family Programs as orientation leaders and another set of five first-generation students who have not served as orientation leaders at Florida State University. It is important to note that the researcher acknowledges the first-generation students who may not be involved with the orientation program may be high-achieving in other areas of campus. The two focus groups of participants will be used to measure the impact of the orientation leader experience on their further student engagement and development with the same outcome for the second set of first-generation college students. Once students have been selected to participate in the study, the researcher will include the participant makeup and overview in the paper as well as provide a more detailed breakdown of the students involved to account for any variables and inconsistencies that may impact the results of the present study. Finally, participants will be instructed to read through and sign an informed consent and deed of gift documents.

### **Interview Process**

The interview process may vary for each individual participant and will be conducted either in person, over the phone, or via Skype. The variety is available as an option for potential participants as a way to accommodate for any instances for flexibility. The consistency of the study will not be compromised as a result of the differing interview processes and will be noted in the final paper. Participants will be reminded to sign the informed consent document (*see Appendix A*) and encouraged to ask any questions they may have about the study. Once both parties agree to move forward, the interview portion will proceed with a variety of questions that will be pre-written in order to capture the experience and story of the participants. Upon completion of the interview, students will be asked to sign the deed of gift document (*see Appendix B*) which enables the researcher to use the contents of the interview for the present study. The participants may choose to identify specific portions of the interview that they do not want to be incorporated into the study. Once terms are agreed, the researcher will move forward and begin the transcription, coding, and identification of themes for each individual and focus group. An example of the interview procedure and questions are located below (*see Appendix C*).

### **ASSESSMENT RESULTS**

The researcher aims to use the results of the assessment to identify whether a relationship exists for first-generation college students involved with New Student and Family Programs as orientation leaders compared to first-generation college students who are not specifically involved as orientation leaders. A potential finding may allow readers to see a positive correlation between a student's experience on campus as a first-generation college student and their involvement with orientation. Upon completion of interviews and focus groups, data will be



available to assist in how first-generation college students navigate their experience at Florida State University as well as shed light on ways to improve the experience and engagement for this student population. Furthermore, the researcher acknowledges there may be additional high-achieving and highly-involved first-generation college students who have not been involved as orientation leaders. When conducting participant profiles, the researcher will be sure to include levels of involvement on campus for each participant.

### **Findings**

Atherton (2014) suggests institutions that provide programming and assistance related to the transition of first-generation college students can positively impact students' social capital and involvement as well as their retention (p. 828). New Student and Family Programs emphasize the importance of training their orientation leaders to "assist students and families in their transition to FSU" and provide resources to "maximize opportunities and attain academic and personal success" (Dean of Students Department, 2015). The researcher finds that becoming involved with the orientation program at Florida State University can provide such an avenue where first-generation students can thrive. Padgett, Johnson, and Pascarella (2012) determine that student affairs practitioners and administrators alike must enhance the experience for first-generation college students by providing programs that propel "academic and social support networks around campus" (p. 262). Similarly, Petty (2014) describes the need for first-generation students to be social, belong, and engage in activities that motivate and increase their self-esteem (p. 136-137). The findings from the present study may result in a greater understanding for how first-generation college students at Florida State University became involved and how their engagement with New Student and Family Programs in particular shapes their level of commitment to their education and the institution. The researcher notes that positive experiences

may also happen despite not being involved as orientation leaders within New Student and Family Programs. The anticipated result is first-generation college students who do serve as orientation leaders at Florida State University have a higher sense of belonging, level of engagement, and a more positive college experience than first-generation college students who do not participate with New Student and Family Programs. The attitudes of student affairs professionals also play a great role in how successful and supported first-generation college students feel (Macias, 2013). The researcher finds that the first-generation students who do become engaged – whether with an orientation program or not – are often-times influenced by a positive relationship from a mentor and supporter.

### **AUDIENCE AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings and results of the present study may be valuable information for many potential audiences, whether intended or not. The researcher focuses the purpose of this study for the following audiences: (1) New Student and Family Programs, (2) First-generation college students, (3) Florida State University Division of Student Affairs, and (4) Faculty.

#### **New Student and Family Programs**

New Student and Family Programs houses the orientation program that serves to assist in the welcoming and transitioning of all incoming first-year students and their family members to Florida State University. The present study may be valuable for the staff members in this particular office because of the focus on the orientation leader program and level of student engagement after a first-generation college student has served in such a capacity. The findings of this study will provide information to the New Student and Family Programs staff on how their orientation program influences and impacts the college experience and level of engagement of

first-generation college students. Furthermore, the office will be able to utilize the present study in order to make potential adjustments to the structure, content, and execution of the orientation program. An additional consequence to the study may result in further enhancement of the program and recruitment of new first-generation college students to serve as orientation leaders.

### **First-Generation College Students**

First-generation college students in particular will be able to better understand and reflect on their experiences while attending and continuing their education at Florida State University. The students may find the research study important in determining how to gain the most fulfilling and supportive experiences at Florida State University, read about the experiences of first-generation college students who became involved with New Student and Family Programs, read the experiences of first-generation college students who were involved in areas outside of the orientation program, and identify ways to further enhance their experience moving forward. Additionally, first-generation college students may feel empowered to articulate and reflect on their journey within Florida State University, before and after. The present study may especially be useful for rising seniors in high school who are looking to attend an institution of higher learning similar to Florida State University. The findings may assist high school students in becoming aware of resources and services that are available to them before ever stepping foot on campus. The researcher believes the level of support and potential for fostering community will increase significantly if the present study – and those similar – are shared with and disseminated to first-generation college students or soon-to-be college students. The students may be able to choose the best avenue for their experience in college and determine whether the orientation program will provide an avenue for accelerated personal and professional development and

growth, foster a sense of community and belonging, and propel students to increase their level of engagement on campus.

### **Florida State University Division of Student Affairs**

The Division of Student Affairs at Florida State University could potentially utilize the information garnered from the present study in order to better understand what New Student and Family Programs is doing to enhance the experience, development, and engagement of first-generation college students. As previous research has indicated, commitment from student affairs professionals is key to the successes of students, particularly first-generation college students. The Division of Student Affairs may also find the study valuable in determining how the development of first-generation college students who are involved with orientation compare with those who are not. This information could result in discovering areas and practices that prove highly impactful and successful for the betterment of first-generation college students. Finally, the narratives and information gained from the present study may provide valuable insight to student affairs professionals on how to best support and engage with first-generation college students. As a result, a potential consequence may be a shift in focus on how professionals, offices, and programs engage and interact with first-generation college students on the Division level.

### **Faculty**

The faculty at Florida State University and beyond may be able to utilize this information for future research and implications to the field of student affairs. The population of first-generation college students has been researched and studied substantially; the present study may offer a narrowed scope on how different first-generation college students engage on campus and what that particular involvement means for future engagement on campus.

### **LIMITATIONS**

It is important to note the limitations of this assessment. First, the findings of this study are based on the experiences of first-generation college students at one particular institution. Additionally, the results may need to be interpreted and viewed with caution as they may not adequately and sufficiently represent the entire first-generation college student population – even at Florida State University. The relatively small sample size may also hinder the generalizability of the study to the greater population of first-generation college students. It is important to note that the present study had very limited resources in terms of available funds, people assisting in the research, interviewing, and execution of the project, and supplies. Furthermore, utilizing data that is self-reported by students may not provide an accurate representation of the actual gains and experiences a student has due to time that has passed, how much growth and development can be assigned to one particular experience (i.e. orientation leader) over another (i.e. other student organization, part-time job, classes, preexisting student attributes). The researcher also acknowledges that by creating an original instrument and utilizing questions through various methods of interviewing, the validity and reliability of the results may be difficult to fully accept. There are ways to overcome each limitation. In the future, having access to both time and resources would prove to be a sufficient remedy to address the aforementioned limitations. The researcher implores and suggests future researchers and potential readers to critically analyze the purpose, methodology, and findings of the study as well as utilize the present study to build on future improvements for research.

## CONCLUSION

The present study found that first-generation college students who were involved with New Student and Family Programs as orientation leaders reported greater levels of future student engagement than first-generation college students who were not involved as orientation leaders at Florida State University. The researcher also found that involvement with the orientation program created a stronger support system, provided additional opportunities for future engagement on campus, and assisted in the transition to and retention of first-generation college students. Conversely, the researcher notes that similar experiences were garnered from first-generation college students not involved with the orientation program, albeit to a lesser extent. The likelihood of a student becoming more engaged and feeling greater investment to and from the institution occurs at a greater and quicker rate for first-generation college students involved with New Student and Family Programs. The researcher believes further research should be done to determine the relationship between the present study and first-generation college students who do not become involved in any organization in order to sufficiently articulate the differences in experiences for first-generation college study type.

Appendix A  
 Informed Consent

Study # \_\_\_\_\_  
 City \_\_\_\_\_  
 State, County \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date \_\_\_\_\_

Florida State University Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

EDH 5068 Outcomes Project Informed Consent

1. You are being asked to participate in an interview in connection with outcomes research project known as "First-Generation Student Engagement". Your participation is voluntary. You will be asked about your experiences (memories, influences, expectations, etc.) as a student at Florida State University.
2. The interview will be audiotaped or video-recorded. In the interview you may be identified by name, subject to your consent. You may also be identified by name in any transcript (whether verbatim or edited) of such interview, subject to your consent. If you choose to remain anonymous, the recording(s) of your interview will be closed to use, and your name will not appear in the transcript or in reference to any material contained in the interview. If you choose to remain anonymous, your interview will only be identified by an internal tracking number, which results in a minimal risk of loss of confidentiality.
3. The interview will take approximately 30 minutes – 1 hour, and you can withdraw from the project without penalty. In the event that you withdraw from the interview, any recording made of the interview will be either given to you or destroyed, and no transcript will be made of the interview. A photograph of you may be taken or borrowed for duplication. If you withdraw from the project, the photograph will be given to you. You will receive no payment for participation in this research, but you will receive a copy of the digital recording and an electronic copy of the transcript for your records.
4. Upon completion of the interview, the digital recording and content of the interview belong to the researcher, and can be used by the researcher in any manner it will determine, including, but not limited to, use by researchers in presentations and publications. The deed of gift grants you an unrestricted license to use the interview in any manner you choose.
5. The researcher agrees that: (i) it will not use or exercise any of its rights to the information in the interview prior to the signing of the deed of gift, (ii) the deed of gift will be submitted to you for your signature at the completion of the interview; and (iii) restrictions on the use of the interview can be placed in the informed consent and be accepted as amending the researcher's rights to the content of the interview. You have the right to review the digital recording or transcript of the interview before you sign the deed of gift.
6. Any restrictions as to use of portions of the interview indicated by you will be edited out of the final copy of the transcript.
7. At the conclusion of this particular study and upon signing the deed of gift, the digital recording(s), photograph, and one copy of the transcript will be deposited in the Florida State University Archive at Florida State University. If you indicate your permission on the deed of gift, a copy may also be provided to the organization that is the focus of your oral history interview for educational and research purposes.
8. If you have questions about the research project or procedures, you can contact Dr. Lara Perez-Felkner, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, at [lperezfelkner@fsu.edu](mailto:lperezfelkner@fsu.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to discuss problems, complaints or concerns about the research study, or to obtain information, or offer input, contact the FSU Human Subjects Office at 850-644-8633.

In consideration of all of the above, I give my consent to participate in this research study. I will be given a copy of this informed consent to keep for my records.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be identified by name in any transcript or reference to any information contained in this interview.  
 \_\_\_\_\_ I wish to remain anonymous in any transcript or reference to any information contained in this interview. I wish to have the digital recording(s) containing my interview closed to use. I wish to have my transcript only identified by an internal tracking number.

Subject's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Subject's Address \_\_\_\_\_  
 Subject's Phone number \_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of Person Obtaining Consent \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix B  
Deed of Gift

City \_\_\_\_\_ Study # \_\_\_\_\_  
State, County \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_

Florida State University Educational Leadership & Policy Studies

EDH 5068 Outcomes Project Deed of Gift

- (a) I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereby give to Florida State University for scholarly and educational use the recordings of interview(s) conducted with me on \_\_\_\_\_, and I grant to Florida State University all of the rights I possess in those recordings, including all intellectual property rights.
- (b) I understand that Florida State University grants me a nonexclusive license to make and to authorize others to make any use I wish of the content of those recordings, and that Florida State University will, at my request, make available to me a copy of those recordings for such use.
- (c) If I wish to remain anonymous in any portion of the interview or reference to any information contained in this interview, I will specify this restriction in paragraph (c) below.
- (d) The foregoing gift and grant of rights is subject to the following restrictions:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

This agreement may be revised or amended by mutual consent of the parties undersigned.

Accepted by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewer—Florida State University Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee signature Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Interviewee address and telephone number



## Appendix C

**Questions for First-Generation Student Engagement in Orientation****The Beginning**

- Introduce myself and purpose of the interview
  - Thank participant for taking time out of their day to meet
  - Seek verbal (re)confirmation on signing of consent
  - Describe process of interview, think of it as a conversation
  - Inform participant of the difference between consent form and deed of gift
  - Ask interviewee to state name, age, and year at FSU
1. What does being a first-generation college student mean to you?
  2. How and why did you get involved with orientation at Florida State University?
  3. How did your background influence your participation in orientation?
  4. Can you tell me about your experience with orientation at Florida State University?
  5. Would you describe your involvement with orientation as being significant? Why?
  6. Would you recommend being an orientation leader to people on a large public institution? Why?
  7. In what ways has orientation impacted your transition to college as a first-generation student?
  8. How does your involvement with orientation influence your academics?
  9. How does orientation influence involvement with other organizations on/off campus? How about your lifestyle? In what ways?
  10. What else are you involved with outside of being an orientation leader?
  11. How do you feel your involvement with orientation prepared you for life after college?

**The Conclusion**

- Thank participant again for taking their time to interview
- Inform them about any follow-up questions and let them know they can contact me and/or I may email them if I need anything else
- Explain the Deed of Gift again and its importance
- Offer them a copy of the finished work once complete

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