

Connection - a Key to College Success

First-generation college students comprise a substantial proportion of the entire college student population. Despite the increasing likelihood of college enrollment among students whose parents did not attend college, first-generation students are at higher risk of failure than are their non-first-generation peers. Also, residents of the Appalachian region of the United States are less likely to enter and eventually succeed in college than non-Appalachian populations.

Research published in 2008 examines the academic, social, and interpersonal experiences of nine first-generation, first-year students attending Shawnee State University in Portsmouth Ohio. Connections to family, academic success, a sense of belonging, and financial issues were salient issues for these students. The unique campus environment assisted students in their integration, and can be instructive for educators working with this population of students in different institutional settings.

These findings spurred the creation of a campus-wide mentoring program to increase students' connection to campus. The program, Shawnee Connect, facilitates the integration process by pairing first-time, first-generation students with faculty and staff. The mentor serves as a guide, liaison, and friend – someone who knows the student by name. Mentors assist with the transition to college and help students make connections with the campus community.

Now in the 2nd year of operation, success data looks promising. First-year retention rates for the pilot group were 74% compared to an institutional average of 57%.

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