Deconstructing the Help-Seeking Behavior of First-Generation Minority College Students

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INTRODUCTION

“Help me, help you!”
First-Generation/Minority College Students (FGMCS)

- Make up nearly 50 percent of the US college student population today (Hirudayaraj, 2011)
  - African-American and Hispanic college students comprise a significant percentage

- Less likely to (NCES, 2005):
  - Be academically prepared upon entry
  - Graduate and/or graduate on time
  - Be satisfied with their chosen major
  - Come from affluent economic backgrounds
• African American and Hispanic students underperform academically relative to White and Asian American peers (Roval et al., 2005)

• Underprepared and “at-risk” students tend not to seek help when they need it, which creates significant learning disadvantages (Ryan et al., 2001)

• In fact, according to Karabenick and Knapp (1988)…
The Help-Seeking Conundrum

Help-Seeking Frequency of College Students

- Low Need
- Moderate Need
- High Need

Help-Seeking Frequency
## A Word About Qualitative Research

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<th>The Good</th>
<th>The Bad</th>
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| • It inspires lots of questions and discussion  
  • This can inform future evaluation, including quantitative study  
  • It is rich, offering first-person accounts of participant experiences | • It is subjective and often invites multiple interpretations of a phenomenon  
  • It is not generalizable and highly contextual  
  • Low participant numbers |
• Participant selection criteria:
  • First-generation college students
  • Ethnic minorities
  • Currently/Previously on academic probation ("high need")
  • All students were part of retention program for first-generation Pell-eligible students at a large four-year institution

• Five semi-structured interviews were conducted
  • All interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded
    • Response themes emerged from this coding process
    • Interviews took about 20 minutes each

• Research question: Why do first-generation minority college students with high need choose to seek or not seek out academic support?

My Qualitative Study: Methods
WHAT'S OUR HYPOTHESIS?
THE THEMES
Let the deconstruction begin…
• Question: Generally speaking, under what circumstances will you seek out academic support?
  
  • Participant #1 (African American woman): “When I feel like I’m failing or not accomplishing anything. I think the last resort is when I would seek help because I try to do things on my own.”

  • Participant #3 (Guyanese American woman): “When I need it the most, when I’m struggling. When I feel very overwhelmed and don’t know what to do and start giving up. Like if I have a D, I know I need to go to tutoring.”

  • Participant #4 (African American man): “For me it’s not like I get worried about an exam and I go see a tutor…it’s not like that…if I’m passing a class, I don’t seek out help.”

  • Participant #5 (Hispanic man): “At the very last moment when I do need it, like when it’s urgent. I usually don’t seek out help, it’s kind of a problem that I have personally. I usually seek it out at the last moment when I really really need it.”

Last Minute Help-Seeking
Question: Generally speaking, why do you choose not to seek out support when you need it?

- **Participant #1 (African American woman):** “My pride comes from my parents. They are prideful too. When you’re independent and on your own…I feel like they taught me that.”

- **Participant #3 (Guyanese American woman):** “I keep telling myself, ‘It’s a D, it’s a D, it’s a D’ when it’s actually an F. My pride wouldn’t let me go out further to say, ‘I’m really slipping up.’”

- **Participant #4 (African American man):** “Most of the time I don’t go to tutoring just to see what I know. It’s like a constant test against myself to see what I can do.”

- **Participant #5 (Hispanic man):** “For me it’s a personal problem that I’ve always had with any help in general. I usually think I can deal with it by myself. It’s how I was raised and stuff.”

Pride and Help-Seeking
Question: What experiences have led you to not seek out this support?

Students associated the following feelings with help-seeking avoidance:
- Shame
- Fear/Intimidation
- Embarrassment
- Annoyance

- Participant #1 (African American woman): “Being that I’m still in Exploratory, I don’t like going to that office cause I have to face the fact that I don’t have a major. Because I started blaming myself because I’m the reason I’m in the situation that I’m in.”

- Participant #3 (Guyanese American woman): “Me in an open space when people can see, I don’t really like to show…I mean when I seek help sometimes I see it as a sign of weakness. I like to be private about it.”
• Question: Generally speaking, is there a way in which support you tend to avoid could be structured in such a way that would increase the likelihood that you would seek it out?
  
  • Participant #1 (African American woman): “I don’t think (long pause)…I think my mindset has to change.”
  
  • Participant #2 (African American woman): “It’s me, it’s not the help or the people. It’s me, in general. It’s my anxiety.”
  
  • Participant #5 (Hispanic man): “No, I believe it’s just me personally…it’s how I have dealt with things. It’s my own motivation to go.”

Accountability
• Question: How would your college experiences be impacted if these [academic support] resources were not available?
  • Participant #1 (African American woman): “I don’t think I would still be here.”
  • Participant #2 (African American woman): “I would not be in school. I feel like you can’t do everything on your own; there’s always something you will need help with.”
  • Participant #3 (Guyanese American woman): “I would be stuck; I would literally sink. Honestly, without the help, I don’t think I would be in school.”
  • Participant #4 (African American man): “If a lot of the resources I have weren’t available I wouldn’t be here, to be honest...I mean, I’m thankful.”
  • Participant #5 (Hispanic man): “I would not be in college. I would have probably flunked out.”

Impact of Academic Support
## Helper Characteristics

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<th>Bad Helper</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Knowledgeable</td>
<td>• Impatient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding</td>
<td>• Lack of knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Non-judgmental</td>
<td>• Judgmental</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Good listener</td>
<td>• Uninterested</td>
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<td>• Good teacher</td>
<td>• Easy to anger</td>
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<td>• Supportive</td>
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<td>• Blunt</td>
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**Helper Characteristics**
Question: What academic support have you sought out during your college career?

- Responses mentioned the following resources:
  - Tutoring and/or tutorial lab
  - Counseling
  - Administrators (i.e. deans, directors etc.)
  - Professors and TA’s
  - Career Center

- Only one participant specifically mentioned advising as a source of academic support

Advising ≠ Academic Support?
• Students reported waiting until last minute to seek out academic support

• Students identified their own pride as a significant detractor to help-seeking behavior

• Students associated help-seeking with several negative feelings (i.e. shame, intimidation, annoyance)

• Students blamed themselves for deficits in help-seeking behavior

• Most students did not identify advising as a source of academic support

• Helper characteristics…most and least desired centered on knowledge and tendency to judge

Summary of Findings
Choosing Success

• Revisiting our word association activity
  • What is our collective orientation?
  • What are the implications for practice?

• The “cruise ship” story
  • Deficit-oriented mindsets yield deficit-oriented solutions

• Promoting success-oriented filters
  • Critically examine our interactions, programming, and unspoken messages
“True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the “rejects of life,” to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands—whether of individuals or entire peoples—need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world.”—Paulo Friere from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*
QUESTIONS/COMMENTS


# References/Suggested Readings
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