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Research Note

First generation college students demographic, socio-economic status, academic experience, successes, and challenges at pharmacy schools in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Identify the demographic, socio-economic status, academic performance, and challenges of first generation college students (FGCS) enrolled in pharmacy schools. Investigate students' perception on the strengths of available resources to support FGCS during their tenure in pharmacy school.

Methods: About 342 FGCS and 248 non-FGCS (NFGCS) from 24 pharmacy schools participated in an online anonymous survey that evaluated students' demographics and socio-economic background, commitment to the pharmacy profession, strength of institutional support, and school experience. Students' responses were analyzed using *t*-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables.

Results: FGCS in pharmacy school are predominantly Caucasians (57.9%) and female (69%). About 15.5% of them come from families living below the federal poverty level; 2.5 times higher than their NFGCS counterparts (6%). While 35.6% of NFGCS come from families earning more than \$100,000 per year, only 9.1% of FGCS belong to this group. No statistical difference between the grade point average of FGCS and NFGCS was found.

Discussion and conclusions: Although most FGCS come from a lower socio-economic background and experience many challenges throughout their tenure in pharmacy school, they still achieve academically as well as their NFGCS counterpart. The United States is rapidly becoming a more racially and ethnically diverse nation, therefore, it is critical that new strategies be designed to bring a stronger representation of minority groups in the field of pharmacy for the years to come.

Introduction

Improving academic success and providing high quality training for all students during their tenure in pharmacy school remain two major focuses for most institutions in the United States. For the academic year of 2016 and beyond, the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) standards were refined to ensure that all graduating students are “practice-ready” and “team-ready.”¹ ACPE Standard 3.4 strongly recommends that institutions should prepare all students to directly contribute to patient care after graduation and also be ready to work efficiently in collaboration with other healthcare providers.¹ Students' academic success, retention, and professional readiness after graduation remains multifactorial and does not solely rely on the strength of faculty, staff, or institutional involvement but can also be influenced by student's own academic preparation, familial support, financial constraints,

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or cultural identity.² Studies have shown that academic success could be related to whether or not a student is a first generation college student (FGCS).³⁻⁷ FGCS are college students from families in which neither parent/legal guardian has completed a bachelor's or four-year college degree.^{3,5,8,9} One in six students in the United States fits this definition of FGCS, representing nearly 17% of the entire college student body.^{3,4}

Unfortunately, the majority of FGCS at four-year colleges and universities experience difficulties adjusting to rigorous college curricula as demonstrated by their lower grade point average (GPA) and high withdrawal or repeat course rate compared to their peers whose parents graduated from college who are known as non-first generation college students (NFGCS).³ Because most FGCS from four-year colleges or universities constantly remain at a disadvantage after entering post-secondary education, their likelihood of attaining a bachelor's degree is lower compared to their NFGCS peers.^{3,10} In terms of demographics, FGCS at four-year colleges and universities are more likely to be students of color and/or non-traditional-aged (25 years and older).^{3,4} Of students identified as FGCS in 2007 in the United States, 22.6% were African Americans, 19% Asians, 16.8% Native Americans, 13.2% Caucasians, and 8.2% Hispanics.⁵ They are more likely than NFGCS to come from low income families.^{3,4,7} Nearly 30% of FGCS have a low socio-economic status and are from families with an annual income less than \$25,000.^{11,12} Additionally, FGCS at four-year institutions face many barriers to degree completion related to the lack of academic rigor in high school, the grant-based financial aid system, the lack of positive and early parental involvement, the lack of early access to information, as well as their low campus engagement.^{10,13}

To our current knowledge, there is no publication addressing FGCS demographics, academic experience, success and challenges in colleges and schools of pharmacy in the United States. The objectives of this study were two-fold: to identify the demographic, socio-economic status, and academic performance of FGCS enrolled in pharmacy schools in the United States and to investigate students' perception on the strengths of available resources to support FGCS during their tenure in pharmacy school.

Methods

Survey introduction and data collection

Data collection was carried out via a 35-question anonymous online survey using the online software developed by Qualtrics (www.qualtrics.com). Some of the survey questions were modified from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) first year student survey trends 1975–2005, a widely cited source of data on college demographics and attitudinal trends.⁵ Others were developed based on the study by Pascarella et al.¹⁴ predicting first year student persistence and voluntary dropout decision in college. Additional source for survey questions included the work of Snyder et al.¹⁵ on the individual differences measures of hope as it relates to students' ability to set goals and achieving these goals. The data from Snyder et al.¹⁵ was used to assess participants commitment to the pharmacy profession and their willingness to graduate. Current school of pharmacy faculty members from pharmacy practice and pharmaceutical and administrative science departments, as well as college assessment administrative staff reviewed the survey for face validity and errors prior to its release. A list of United States colleges and schools of pharmacy with fully accredited professional degree programs was obtained from the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy (AACCP) website as of December 2015.¹⁶ Survey invitations were sent via email to the Deans of institutions as previously described.¹⁷ Briefly, Deans were asked to review, approve, and forward the survey link to their entire pharmacy school student body. If no response was received after two weeks, a second request was sent to those deans. The study was conducted between January and April 2016. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent before taking the survey. There were no known risks anticipated with answering the survey questions. No identifying information other than basic demographics was collected. No individual responses were assessed; results were made anonymous and analyzed in aggregate. Upon agreeing to take the survey, participants were asked to self-identify as FGCS or NFGCS. The definition of a FGCS was provided to them in the introductory statement of the survey.

Study population

The target population for our study was college students enrolled at colleges and schools of pharmacy with fully accredited status professional degree programs in the United States.

Outcome measures and observation

The survey questions were divided into four distinct categories to measure students' 1) demographics and socio-economic status; 2) commitment to the profession; 3) perception on the strength of institutional support and 4) pharmacy school experience.

Data analysis and major outcome

Statistical analyses were performed utilizing *t*-tests for continuous variables and chi-square tests for categorical variables; comparing the characteristics in FGCS and NFGCS groups. Chi-square or Fisher's exact tests were used to examine the association between FGCS and various outcomes. To determine the study major outcomes, "strongly agree" and "somewhat agree" were merged into the "agree" category for data analysis. Similarly, "strongly disagree" and "somewhat disagree" were merged into the "disagree" category. A third category included "neither agree or disagree." The latter data set was not included in the data analysis whenever the percentage was less than 5%. At the end of the survey, participants were asked to self-report their GPA under the following categories: less than 2.5; 2.5–2.99; 3.0–3.24; 3.25–3.49; 3.5–3.74 or 3.75–4.0. The statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. All statistical

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