

Abstract

DISSERTATION: The Autonomous Journey: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of First Generation College Students Who Persist

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The U.S. remains competitive in terms of providing access to higher education; however, it rests near the bottom of industrialized nations in relation to degree attainment. Only 31 percent of first time full-time students who attend a public college or university will graduate in the traditionally allotted time-frame of four years. As first generation students comprise an ever-increasing percentage of the overall student population, it would serve that they also hold a position of significance in the study of student persistence and degree attainment.

The purpose of this descriptive phenomenological study was to explore how seven first generation university students, or recent graduates, experienced autonomy during their academic journey at a midsized Midwestern public university, and to view its potential influence on academic persistence. In this study, autonomy was viewed as the socially constructed notion of self-authoring one's course through life, which is a positive condition that allows the individual to reach his or her full potential through the development of creativity and authenticity.

The primary aim of the study was to develop a better understanding of how first generation students experience autonomy in relation to academic pursuits. The study found that autonomy,

as experienced by study participants, is experienced through six themes: *sense of purpose, self-reflection, internal locus of control, resistance to conformity, perseverance, and the uniqueness of being first generation*. Study findings affirm much of the literature concerning the benefits of fostering autonomy, as well as the struggles associated with being a first generation university student. Further, findings suggest that autonomy positively influenced the persistence of participants and served to support their attainment of a university degree. The findings indicate that fostering student autonomy within the academic community could help to allay the rising tide of student attrition.

Keywords: autonomy, first-generation students, persistence, retention, higher education