How to Support Stonehill College’s First-Generation College Students (FGCS)

As Stonehill College has a significant first-generation college student population (close to 20%), it is imperative that we understand who these students are and where they are coming from so that we can better support them. As background, here are some generally accepted facts about FGCS:

- More likely to work while going to school
- More likely to be a student of color
- More likely to come from a low income background
- More likely to assume a caregiver role at home
- More likely to come from a less rigorous high school
- Less likely to graduate than non-FGCS peers
- Less likely to be retained from first to second year
- Less likely to volunteer to speak in class
- Less likely to feel a sense of community on campus
- Less likely to understand the role of ‘college student’

What can we do to support these students? Simple: show them that you care! It’s made easy with this helpful acrostic.

I nvest – Faculty support and academic intervention have been shown to be the best ways to retain FGCS (more successful than social or behavioral intervention). Get to know your students so that you can understand where they are coming from, what hurdles they have faced to get here, and what their goals are for the future.

C onnect – Work with other departments to support these students; frequently, a team approach to support can be most beneficial. Work with Academic Services, the Career Development Center, Intercultural Affairs, Health and Wellness, Counseling Services, Athletics, Student Financial Services, Campus Ministry, Accessibility Resources, the Center for Writing and Academic Achievement, etc. to support all facets of the student lifecycle (personal, professional, social, academic, spiritual, etc.). Creating this safety net of support decreases the chances that students will fall through the cracks.

A cknowledge and Appreciate – Many times, simply acknowledging the grit and sacrifice that comes along with being first in the family to attend a higher-education institution is the first step to better understanding these students. Typically (though not always!) these students come from lower socioeconomic statuses, are more likely to work, are more likely to assume a caregiver role outside of the classroom, and are more likely to be academically underprepared for college. It takes perseverance and tenacity to make it to college without a lot of support. These survival skills and real life experiences can enrich classroom conversation in a meaningful way. View FGCS from a benefit-added model, not a deficit perspective.

R eassure – Many students, but especially first-gens, struggle with not feeling as if they belong on campus. They cannot internalize their own successes and feel fraudulent (frequently referred to as the Imposter Syndrome). Giving positive feedback and complimenting work done for class can go a long way in helping a student feel as if they belong. This may seem commonsensical, but it has real impacts on a student’s sense of worth and academic self-esteem.

E ncourage – First-Generation College Students are frequently reluctant to seek out help for issues they are facing. As there is a stigma associated with being first-gen, who would want to admit they are a FGCS and need help? We can encourage students to take advantage of available resources on campus by making referrals and normalizing this process. Explain that it is completely normal to feel lost, overwhelmed, or homesick, and commend the student for reaching out for support. Offer to help make connections in other departments on the student’s behalf – doing so will take off a significant amount of pressure and reinforce the fact that we are all here, together, to support Stonehill students.
References


