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# Edward W. Chance Dissertation Award For Doctoral Research in Rural Education

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## Upon Entering College: First Semester Experiences of First-Generation, Rural Students from Agricultural Families

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First-generation and rural college students are considered by many retention theorists and practitioners to be an at-risk population. This study examined the details of the first semester in postsecondary education from the perspective of a group of students who met the demographic criteria of being first-generation to go to college, from rural geographical areas, and from agricultural backgrounds. It focused on the first semester experience, during its occurrence, and how six students of this specific population viewed that phenomenon. A secondary objective was to determine if the understandings that issued from the research could form a foundation from which first semester retention strategies for this particular population could be configured.

Information about the essence of the first semester emerged from the responses of the participants to four primary research questions in a structured interview format: (1) What people or thing do you think influenced your decision to go to college? (2) When did you first decide that you were going to go to college? (3) Is your first semester the same or different than what you expected? (4) What does all of this mean to you? What is the meaning of your first semester in college?

The preponderance of research regarding first semester experiences has employed methods that are decidedly quantitative. Many are descriptive in nature and most tend to concentrate on a distinct student characteristic and attempt to find correlations between that characteristic and freshman attrition, or retention, as the case may be. The intent of this study, however, was to attempt to understand the meaning of the many facets of the first semester experience from the voices of the students themselves.

A phenomenological methodology provided the overall approach to the study (Moustakas, 1994). Data gathering was accomplished through in-depth, structured interviews with students who agreed to be participants in this study (Seidman, 1998). Within-case and cross-case analyses were employed as data explication methods (Banning, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Miles & Humberman, 1994). A process of abductive coding provided the means for identifying, labeling, categorizing, and verifying patterns and themes

that emerged from the raw data in the interview transcripts.

### Research Findings and Interpretations

The highest order of clustering of themes produced patterns incorporated in the concepts of decision factors and influences, decision time factors, expectations and incongruencies, and introspective constructions.

#### *Decision Factors and Influences*

In general, the decision to enter college was impacted both positively and negatively by numerous factors and influences in the natural environment within which the participants operated. Not surprisingly, parental attitudes about going to college, or lack of attitudes, seemed to have significant influence on the decision. Where support was offered by a parent or both parents, the decision was easier for the participant. Where one parent objected to the college-going concept, the participant was conflicted and somewhat confused about his or her decision.

The most frequent condition connected to parents and the college-going decision among these participants was found to be first-generation status and a relationship to the lack of parental information about higher education. This finding is in concurrence with a study of national averages by the U.S. Department of Education on first-generation college students (2001):

As parents education increases, so does students' likelihood of enrolling in postsecondary education. Among 1992 high school graduates whose parents did not go to college, 59% had enrolled in some sort of postsecondary education by 1994. The enrollment rate increased to 75% among those whose parents had some college experience, and to 93% among those whose parents had at least a bachelor's degree. (pg. 7)

Several of the participants in this study experienced resistance to the decision by a father who either did not want

the participant to leave the farm, or was intransigent in signing financial aid forms. This is illustrative of the difficulties that first-generation students face in the decision making process. The problem is compounded by the agricultural background.

### *Decision-Time Factors*

The time orientation from which the participants made their decision to enter college varied. Some participants began thinking about higher education in elementary and middle school, but most formulated the concept of going to college in high school or later. Only one instance of negative early thoughts about going to college surfaced, and that idea remained with that lone individual even into the first semester of postsecondary. The majority of participants conceptualized going to college in high school or later. Several participants, aided by encouragement by coaches, made the decision quite late in high school. The themes seem to illustrate that very few of the participants had concrete and substantial plans to enter college before actually taking any steps to bring it to fruition. They had thought about it, but not very seriously. For most, it was either at the end of their senior year, or later, that they began to consider themselves as college material and to take actions to apply to college.

This is in agreement with a reference made to the 1986 Attinasi study in Elliott (1989). Elliott found that first-generation, rural high school students tended to make the decision to attend college late in their high school careers, whereas the rural students in the Attinasi study group "had almost without exception come to see themselves as college material *long before* (italics added) entering the University of Iowa" (pg. 188). The Elliott study correctly pointed out that Attinasi's subjects were comprised of rural, Mexican-American youth who had ACT composites exceeding 22. Although rural, Attinasi's students were bound for college early in their high school years. Elliott concentrated on a more general population of rural youth (without reference to grade point average) and their college-going behaviors. Additionally, another understanding of the decision making process for the participants in this study indicates that there may be another dimension added when the participants are both rural *and* from *agricultural backgrounds*. The agricultural background of the participants seems to have contributed to the late recognition that they might in fact be ready and capable of going to college.

Financial support was an important determinant in the decision-making continuum in this study. Across all cases, participants experienced non-existent to low levels of family financial support which seemed to add to the factors that led to late decision making. However, where even low to modest family financial support was present, there was a connection between satisfaction with the college-going decision among the participants. Yarbrough (1996) found that "[college] admissions directors perceived the lack of

finances to be a primary factor in the reasons why rural students did not pursue higher education" (pg. 81).

Leaving a small town environment and moving to a larger town and a college campus was viewed favorably by a few of the participants. For the majority, this transition produced anxiety. Some of the behaviors exhibited, and choices made, by the participants in this new, larger environment in their first semester turned out to be counterproductive to a positive assimilation into their new settings. Similarly, Elliott (1989) found that "rural students attempt to use their existing schemas to guide decision-making and predict future events. Because some rural students lack the background necessary to make sense of the unfamiliar events in the new world and respond effectively, integration into the new situation is hampered" (p.194).

### *Expectations and Incongruencies*

Perhaps one of the most unique findings of this study is the depth and breadth of the experiences that were different, or came as complete surprises, to the participants. It is a direct result of the phenomenological approach to this study, and the in-depth interviews, that these surprising conditions became evident. By and large, the participants found themselves unaware of the need to build new relationships, and to cope with a college environment and culture which proved to be extremely dissimilar to that which they had known all their lives. In a few instances these aspects of the first semester (i.e. cultural diversity, dorm life) were a very difficult and emotionally charged process. Others had the requisite socialization skills necessary to aid in their assimilation. Their agricultural background seemed to be either a help, or a hindrance. But, in all cases, that background had an effect on the phenomenon.

That these participants were unprepared for the magnitude of the change between rural/agricultural life and the college milieu is not undocumented. Yarbrough (1996) reported that "many rural high school students are perceived to make decisions about higher education without sufficient professional assistance. The majority of (rural) principals [in her study] reported half-time or less than half-time high school counselors in their schools" (p. 80).

The majority of the participants were pleasantly surprised by the culture of learning and took to it with pleasure; only a few struggled with the rigor, but some of them may have had another surprise when their first semester grades were posted. The dimension of "size" seemed to prove the most discrepant in terms of the pre-first semester expectations. The large physical size of the campus, the close quarters of the dormitory rooms, the expansiveness of the classrooms, the breadth of the curricula, the amount of money needed for school and living expenses, the scope of the change from rural/agricultural high school student status to that of being a college student, and the extensiveness of the surrounding community all produced feelings of awe, and sometimes trepidation.

### *Introspective Construction.*

The *meaning* of the first semester provided an opportunity for the participants to be introspective about the phenomenon. This concept came last in the order of questions and produced many leitmotifs, some of which were quite abstract. The high level of abstraction is most likely due to the unstructured condition inherent in the notion of "meaning."

Familial connectedness refers to the participants' ability, as well as the desire, to form new relationships in the college environment and maintain those that already exist. This concept also included the immensity of the change -- a construction that permeated the movement of the participants from one relatively comfortable ontological view to one that is new and confusing, (albeit exciting for nearly all of the participants).

Agricultural attributes emerged as a significant leitmotif that encompassed mostly positive concepts about those attributes that were drawn from a life of hard work, self-reliance, pride, and self-directed behavior. Participants saw the first semester and the college-going condition as an opening up of occupational, academic, and personal opportunities. Each of the participants valued the first semester as a vehicle to first establish goals, and then to achieve them.

### **Conclusions**

First-generation status generated numerous problems for these participants in their first semester in college. Leitmotifs such as ignorance about the cost of college and financial aid; lack of parental information about college; misunderstandings stemming from ignorance about the value of relationship-building; and the "surprise" factor relating to college course rigor, course structure, and professorial expectations can all be attributed to first-generation status.

Rural status clearly contributed to the students' lack of experience with large towns, large campuses, and the diversity found in the college environment. Affective concepts of disconnectedness, lack of solitude, desire to "get back out in the country" from time to time, as well as pleasure, excitement, pride, and accomplishment are largely attributable to the condition of being a rural student in the first semester in college.

Agricultural status was the "wild card" conjuncture in this study. The absence of literature relating to the agricultural background status and its possible effect on students' meaning of the first semester in college makes the exploration of this condition provocative and unique. It is essential to understand that the participants in this study were inexorably linked by the triple demographic characteristics of first-generation, rural, and agricultural background. Hence, a determination of which of the first semester experiences might be qualities of each specific

condition was difficult.

However, the findings support a contention that there were indeed identifiable instances, or themes, that were attributable to agricultural background status. These participants spoke about their agronomic backgrounds as if they mattered to them. The farm, the ranch, the rodeos, the work that they performed, all were expressed as integral parts of their being. The essence of the person cannot be separated from the essence of the phenomenon; in this case, the first semester experience.

The pride of being a person with an agricultural background who has "worked hard" to accomplish difficult tasks was connected to the reasons why most of the participants felt like they could successfully navigate college and the first semester. Agricultural "heritage" was viewed by participants as being partly responsible for their belief that they would be persistent in adjusting to the new world of higher education. But, that heritage also seemed to create obstacles. To some, other students were perceived as not understanding their clothing preferences. Nearly all of the participants held a belief that they had had to work harder before college than other students, creating a disharmony in relationship-building. And perhaps the most significant theme of all: participants saw themselves as being "different from others" in the new college milieu. They were different because they were from rural areas, and because they were the first-generation in their families to attend college. And, they were also different because they had an agricultural heritage. Adam summed up this disparate condition when he remarked about the meaning of the first semester: "It's just being a long way from any cows. That's all you have to say."

### **Recommendations**

*Recruitment Assimilation Strategy:* Institutions of higher education that enroll new students who are rural, first-generation, and agricultural might improve the likelihood of early student acclimatization by having a heightened presence in rural high schools. It would be advantageous to this end for recruiters to pay special attention to late college-going-decision-makers, such as the participants in this study. College program coordinators should hold events in the evening so that parents can attend. Although some colleges may already employ these techniques for recruitment in rural areas, this study also indicates that parents of first-generation, rural, and agricultural students may not ask questions during these sessions, because they do not know what questions to ask, or because college education does not have valence for them. Anticipating that the "right" questions might not get asked, recruiters may find it advantageous to project slides or produce brochures that graphically make visible the layout of typical classrooms, dorm rooms, a professor's office, inside and outside views of the library buildings, and perhaps even aerial photographs of the school showing its

dimensionality in relation to the surrounding community.

*Extended Orientation:* Colleges and universities might offer an extended orientation program specifically for incoming freshmen who are members of the multi-demographic group studied in this dissertation research. It appears that the optimal timing for such a program would be either based on a "summer bridge" model, or one that takes place *immediately before* the semester begins. Participants in this study were surprised about the "size" factors regarding the college environment fundamentally because they had apparently not visited the campus previously. Or if they had, their tour must have been too brief or too minimal to allow them to form ideas about the environment that were rational and useful.

Selecting and providing orientation facilitators with information regarding those facets of the first semester that are most troublesome for these students could pre-empt some or many of the occurrences that were reported by participants in this study. A major topic for the orientation should include relating students' rural and agricultural, positive attributes to success in college. An additional topic would cover the concept of re-framing underdeveloped freshmen hopes and desires for success in life toward a more refined path-goal approach to encourage valence for higher education, in order to maximize the potential for postsecondary accomplishment.

*Peer Mentors:* Institutions should consider assigning peer mentors to students who are members of this multi-demographic group. By identifying first-generation, rural, and agricultural first-semester freshmen it is believed that an early intervention program such as mentoring would accomplish two desirable outcomes. One potential outcome is fundamental: early identification of students in this group so that positive interaction and intervention can take place. The second outcome would be an advantageous consequence of the first. Students who are the recipients of the mentor intervention in their first semester could become mentors to incoming freshmen of the same multi-demographic group after matriculating into their second semester.

Additional research is warranted with regard to agricultural students because they are a relatively non-studied subset of first-generation and rural demographics. Qualitative research might be used as the approach to ascertain how college-goers in this group view parental involvement. For example, a research study might

concentrate on the phenomenon of parental involvement in the college decision making process for this population, with particular attention being paid to the agricultural segment of the cohort.

A research survey of this complex, multi-demographic population that utilizes an instrument based on the themes of college decision making factors; decision-time orientation; expectations and incongruencies; and the introspective constructions of familial connectedness, agricultural attributes, and portals could be conducted in a quantitative manner to seek correlations between these themes and freshman retention, grade point average, first semester satisfaction, etc.

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