

EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS: EXPLORING COLLEGE EDUCATION AS AN EXTENDED SERVICE ENCOUNTER

Mark Ligas, Charles F. Dolan School of Business, Fairfield University,
North Benson Road, Fairfield, CT 06430-5195; (203) 254-4000.

ABSTRACT

The attrition rate from degree programs for first-generation college students is almost twice as high as for students from families in which at least one parent has a college degree. The purpose of this research is to identify and explore the experiences of the first-generation student, in order to uncover what he needs from the encounter to persist in a program of study. Data generated from depth interviews indicate that these students engage in various experiences that enable them to "break away" and "move on" from their prior lifestyles. These experiences have implications for both marketing faculty and administrators concerning ways to educate and retain such students.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research on college continuation rates for high school students suggests that college enrollment is on the rise. The most recent statistics (October 2000) show that 84% (approximately 2.7 million students) of high school seniors actually graduated or received their GED in 1999. Further, 63% (approximately 1.7 million students) of this cohort enrolled in college (2- and 4-year, part- and full-time programs). This is up almost a full percentage point from 1998, and it is approaching the forty-year high of 67% in 1996 (Postsecondary Education Opportunity Research Letter #107, May 2001). More importantly however, almost one-half of the 1.7 million college-enrolled students (47%) are *first-generation college students* (Choy 2001).

A first-generation college student is the first member of his immediate family to attend an institute of higher education. Traditionally, these students have minimal guidance and few personal connections to turn to for advice concerning college (Horn and Nunez 2000; London 1989). Such students lack confidence, are on "constant guard" with regard to how they are perceived, and as a consequence, struggle to assimilate in unfamiliar environments while also "managing their identities" (Granfield 1991). Thus, although almost one-third (30%) of these students will enroll at 4-year institutions, only 20% will live on-campus (National Center for Education Statistics #98-082, June 1998; Choy 2001).

This lack of knowledge, combined with what amounts to an identity crisis, leads to increased attrition rates early on during the undergraduate program of study. First-generation college students are about twice as likely to drop out of a four-year program by their second year than are students whose parents obtained bachelor's degrees (Choy 2001). Also, these students exhibit lower levels of both academic and social integration during their collegiate encounters (National Center for Education Statistics #98-082, June 1998). The inability to either adapt to the academic rigors or to fit in with others has dramatic negative repercussions, especially in terms of the student being able to persist in a degree program (Thomas 2000). Academically, the learning environment and resultant social context are not enabling the student to better nurture and shape his identity (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982). From an administrative perspective, the university setting (classroom included) is not delivering on those experiences that satisfy the expectations of first-generation college student consumers (Oliver 1997).

In this research, I explore those experiences, academic as well as personal and social, that are relevant to the first-generation student. I begin by reviewing literatures on extended services encounters and role-playing and relate these concepts to college education. I then outline the methodology employed in this research and present the results of exploratory research based on phenomenological interviews with first-generation college students. Based on the data, I elaborate on the notions of "breaking away" and "moving on" and their implications for marketing faculty and university administrators.

BACKGROUND

Extended Service Encounters and Role-Playing

In extended service encounters the *duration* of service delivery creates the potential for numerous customer experiences (Arnould and Price 1993). As a result, the customer often takes on different roles, depending on his level of involvement in specific "scripted situations," e.g., being the "life of the party" in social situations and "a bookworm" in

academic situations (Grove and Fisk 1983; Grove, Fisk, and John 2000). Such encounters offer a rich and detailed context in which to explore consumption behavior, because the customer's personal consumption decisions throughout the encounter shape the conception, delivery, and outcome of every experience. Each decision that the customer makes not only affects his current actions, i.e., role, but it also influences the next decision. In extreme cases, the experiences may "transform" the customer's personal being, or identity (Kleine and Kleine 2000; Schouten and McAlexander 1995).

Education as an Extended Service Encounter

This research considers a college education as an extended service encounter. The undertaking itself is often seen as a "long road," but one that is an instrumental investment in shaping one's life (Shor 1986). Once the purchase decision is made, the student typically commits himself to the experience for an extended time period (four or five years). During this time, the student has the opportunity to take on many different roles (e.g., academic, work-study employee, residential advisor, etc.). Thus, college life is both an extend and "extraordinary" experience, because it gives the student consumer the opportunity to exercise his hedonic component by participating in a variety of personally meaningful and often intense and rigorous events that shape the "rite of passage" into adulthood (Arnould and Price 1993).

METHODOLOGY

Sample and Procedure

I conducted individual interviews with first-generation college students who attend a well-known university in the Northeast. All informants were college juniors who studied business administration. In order to identify these informants, each member from a cohort of undergraduate business majors (N=30) completed a brief questionnaire concerning major, semester rank, and family's education background.

The interviews were phenomenological in nature. Each informant had the opportunity to present and interpret his account in order to reveal and elaborate on as much/as little of his college education experience that he felt was appropriate (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Although a structured interview guide was not used, I attempted to keep the discussions focused on the informant's personal experiences, both leading up

to and during his collegiate encounter. Thus, each informant was able to offer richly detailed and, in many cases, personally meaningful anecdotes pertaining to a particular experience (Geertz 1973; McCracken 1988). The interviews ranged in length from two to three and a half hours. Each interview was tape-recorded and later transcribed. At the end of each interview, each informant was debriefed, thanked, and paid for his participation.

Analysis

Analysis of the interview transcripts followed a "part-to-whole" strategy (Spiggle 1994). Each transcript was read at least three times, in order to identify and code each specific experience elaborated on by each informant. Not only was each informant interview treated as a unique "piece" of data, but each experience within each interview was also identified as a separate piece of information. Once each transcript was coded, the focus turned to comparing experiences across all the transcripts, as a means of identifying commonalities among the informants' accounts.

INFORMANT DATA

In this section, I present data generated from three of the depth interviews with first-generation college students. "Michelle," "Gene," and "Maria" recall different experiences and discuss various expectations for their collegiate encounters.

Michelle: "Finding a Safe Haven"

Much of Michelle's interview focused on a need to escape from her physical surroundings. Growing up in a large city, Michelle witnessed both the competitive and financial pressures associated with living in a major metropolitan area.

[My mother] has been with the same firm for thirty-five years, and she still sees people who come in straight out of college, those who are twenty-two years old or so, just fresh off the campus, and they will have a similar or higher position. You can't feel too good about that....

However, it was not just about being competitive in the job market. Going to college would mean that Michelle could relocate to a safer environment.

I was held up twice in one week. I was held up the Tuesday before Christmas and then again before New Year's, so...from that point on, I was anxious. I would not go anywhere in

the city; this was not the place for me...It is not a good environment.

In contrast, the college environment would provide a "safe haven," with little threat of physical harm. Michelle lamented about the dangerous city, and she recognized that staying in the city would not be conducive to a better future.

The longer you stay [in the city], the more you are exposed...My friend across the street...I don't know what happened, but he is now in jail for life because he murdered someone when he was on cocaine...and he was so polite, and his family had money...So I thought that if he could get sucked into it, so could I.

By going to college, Michelle was able to prepare herself for a rewarding job in the future while not having to constantly worry about physical threats in the present. In addition, she was able to meet others who were "like her," i.e., other students who had similar personal experiences and reasons for wanting to pursue college degrees.

There are a lot of different people here at school, and some have had similar situations as mine, and they are trying to get ahead too. That feels kind of good, having the same kinds of people around...and [although] my friends at home think, 'Oh, now she is stuck up,' the people at school support me. They help me with my work, and we are very close.

Gene: "Leaving a Blue Collar Lifestyle Behind"

Gene comes from a small, rural town where agriculture is the major industry. Gene also witnessed his father's job mobility stall, because his father did not have the degree credentials that the firm valued for advancement. This occurrence was very motivating, because Gene's father actually tried to attend college but had to drop out in order to support the family.

My dad had to drop out of school because he didn't have the money...and it is not like he [dislikes] the type of job he has, but he told me that he wishes that he had more education. He is passed over for certain positions because he does not have a diploma from a university. My mom sees it too in her job, but not to the extent of my dad's experience.

From Gene's perspective, a college education would not only offer opportunities in any given workplace position; but at a more fundamental

level, the college experience and resulting degree would insure that Gene would not work in a manual labor, "blue collar" position.

With the education that I received in high school, I was going to be limited...You get through high school and you need something else; you keep needing more and more education...I saw people without any college experience, and they were truck drivers and warehouse people. They know what they are going to do each day and that is it...I don't want to be doing that...I don't want it to be this way for the rest of my life...I don't want to do the manual labor for the rest of my life.

Gene focused almost exclusively on how the college experience would afford him the educational opportunities necessary to identify and obtain a "white collar" position with the appropriate responsibilities and rewards. One is able to construct many different scenarios for the future while in college, each one with different academic requirements and outcomes post-graduation. Gene favored having choices, because he was solely responsible for making his own decisions.

It is just that there are so many options. Here is what happens if you take option A, and here is what happens if you take option B. In my case, I decided to choose option A [business], and it was not like I was forced into a choice. It was all my own choice.

Maria: "Finding a New Self"

Maria was her parent's "little girl." Raised in an urban environment by over-protective, deeply religious parents, Maria felt that her parents constantly monitored her actions and decisions. Although she loved and respected them, Maria believed that every move she made was dictated by her parent's wishes.

My parents were born in South America, and my dad stopped going to school when he was younger so that he could work and raise money...I think that since he was not able to get a college education, he was trying to live the experience through me...I think that is why he pushed all of us, though he pushed me more...And my mom was the one who was worried. I lived with them in the city all my life, and...she was just worried that [when I went away] I would not be safe.

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