Service Learning Critical Reflection

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In the past few years, many have begun the research about the relationship between classism, first-generation college students, and barriers to the college process (Coaston, 2019; Duncheon, 2018; Furquim et al, 2017; Fryberg et al, 2012; Roderick et al, n.d; Stephens et al, 2012; Tomiko, 2014; Wilbur & Roscigno, 2016). The college process includes admission to college and retention once enrolled. For many reasons, the first-generation college student status has many effects on college admission and retention compared to non-first generation students. Studies have found that first-generation students are roughly 70 percent less likely to enroll in college and 60% less likely to graduate than their non-first generation peers (Wilbur et al, 2016). These shocking statistics prove the importance of studying the barriers that first-generation college students face in the admission process and retention. The importance of access to a college education to improve educational inequality and social mobility for generations to come. Due to the educational inequalities that exist in the United States, the relationship between classism and barriers to the college admissions process for first-generation students must be studied to increase college-readiness, access, admission, and retention once enrolled.

**Pre-College Barriers**

There are a number of pre-college barriers that many first-generation students face. One of these barriers is the inequality of education for students of different classes. Many low-income schools do not have the same access to resources that higher-income schools have. This can lead to educational inequality due to a lack of resources. Many higher-income schools even have classes that specifically prepare students to take college entrance exams and have college-readiness courses. These courses are not used at every school which creates a disadvantage that many low-income students face.

College readiness includes content knowledge, behavioral skills, and the ability to apply for colleges (Roderick et al, n.d.). The content skills include basic knowledge such as reading, writing, math, etc. at a college level (Duncheon, 2018). The behavioral skills are the skills that will ensure success in college such as time-management, study habits, and teamwork (Duncheon, 2018). Knowledge of college includes familiarity with admissions procedures, apply for financial aid, and other important aspects to being admitted into college (Roderick et al, n.d.). Roderick and her team emphasize the importance of these skills being taught in high schools to close the aspirations-attainment gap and allow all students the ability to achieve a college degree (Roderick et al, n.d.)

A study was done in a low-performing urban high school where most of the students were first-generation students. Many of these students were found to ultimately have a lack of college-readiness. Many also found that the non-cognitive skills and knowledge of college were more important than cognitive skills (Duncheon, 2018). They had difficulty finding help from their professors and academic support systems (Duncheon, 2018). First-generation students are already at a disadvantage because they do not have their parents to help them through the admissions process. They do not have guidance in this area and may require extra help in the admissions process. To eliminate these barriers, a project from the University of Chicago suggests that first-generation students should be given preferable treatment in admissions (Tomiko, 2014).

In addition to getting preferable treatment in the admissions process, the project at the University of Chicago suggests that first-generation students be given preferable treatment in the area of financial aid (Tomiko, 2014). Navigating financial aid is a pre-college barrier that many students face. With the sharp increase in tuition and fees at many universities, increasing numbers of students are having to apply for financial aid. First-generation students are again at a disadvantage because their parents are not familiar with the financial aid process. Parents who did not attend college tend to have a lack of understanding about the complicated process of admissions (Furquin et al, 2017). Many of these students who lack parental figures with experience in this area may rely on their high school for help in this process. Studies have found that low-income schools have a lack of resources in this area. This lack of resources attributes to students receiving many conflicting or unhelpful advice on student loans (Furquin et al, 2017). Additionally, parents who did not attend college are statistically less likely to begin planning and saving for college for their children (Furquin et al, 2017). These are all unique barriers that first-generation students face.

The project from the University of Chicago argues that many college campuses are racially diverse but not economically diverse (Tomiko, 2014). The barriers that first-generation students face make many selective institutions inaccessible (Tomiko, 2014). With preferential treatment in the areas of admissions, financial aid, and institutional outreach, it can ensure that campuses are economically diverse and open to all students. This will also help to eliminate the barriers that come from educational inequality in high schools across the United States. The goal of the educational system should be to allow all students an equal chance to succeed in college if they choose. Though many strides have been made in terms of educational inequality, there is still more to be done to allow this goal to be a reality (Roderick et al, n.d.)

**Barriers once Admitted to College**

After admitted to college, first-generation students continue to face barriers. One study showed that first-generation students had a higher level of cortisol levels and negative emotions while giving a speech in a college classroom than their non-first generational peers (Stephens et al, 2012). The study found that this was to blame partly on the cultural norms adopted by universities. The study found that universities hold the value of independence as a cultural norm (Stephens et al, 2012). Many first-generation students are not going to college to gain independence. They are going for interdependent reasons and to help their family (Stephens et al, 2012). This difference is norms increases first-generation student’s feelings of belonging and stress. This study argues that to increase belonging and decrease stress for first-generation students, universities must adopt interdependent cultural norms (Stephens et al, 2012).

A similar study showed that the difference between cultural norms for first-generation students and their universities can account for a performance gap. The study argues that to close this performance gap, the universities must adopt interdependence as a cultural norm (Fryberg et al, 2012). Instead of focusing on independence, universities can focus on the value of community (Fryberg et al, 2012).

**Research Question**

What is the relationship between classism and barriers to the college admissions process for first-generation students in terms of college-readiness, access, admission, and retention once enrolled?

**Method Section**

After reviewing the various literature on classism and barriers to the college admissions process for first-generation students, the Shadow Project is an attempt to eliminate some of the barriers these students may face. The Shadow Project is a project where a group of high school seniors, who would be first-generation college students if they choose to pursue college, came to the University of Oklahoma for a day.

To choose the school to attend the Shadow Project, my team contacted schools in low-income areas near the university that may benefit from this project. The guidance counselors were contacted and they let my team know if they were interested. After the school was narrowed down, the guidance counselors were updated on pertinent information about the event.

To better know the needs of the students who were attending the event, a pre-survey was sent out. The pre-survey would have the students choose which class they were most interested to visit. The pre-survey also included information about the student’s dietary restrictions. Additionally, many volunteers were needed to make the day a success. Volunteers were other members of the Human Relations department at OU. After confirming the number of students who were to attend the event, the final step was reserving rooms on the University’s campus to accommodate all of the students.

The project was divided into 5 parts: welcome and panel of first-generation college students, college class, lunch, education on various resources, and wrap up. My team contacted the University of Oklahoma’s admissions office to obtain parking passes for the students to park on campus for the day. On the day of the event, the student’s parked in their designated lot where one of the team members met the students to walk to the first location. The students checked in and were assigned their groups for the day.

For the next part of the event, a panel of six current first-generation college students shared their stories and answer the questions of the guest students. To allow the students to see a college class, professors were contacted to see if they would allow our group of students to come to observe their class. My team chose to contact a wide variety of professors in many fields such as chemistry, Human Relations, and Engineering. The volunteers led the groups of students to the class of their choosing. After class, the students were led to lunch. To best accommodate all of the student’s dietary needs, donations for the University’s cafeteria were provided for lunch. The final part of the event was education on various resources. The Diversity Enrichment Program of OU was contacted and they provided one of their interns to give a speech about resources available for these students. After all the student’s questions were answered, they were released to go back to their school.

**Critical Reflection**

Intersectionality is an HR theory that says that race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, disability, etc., all overlap on each other (Coaston, 2019). This overlap connects them and creates unique forms of discrimination and prejudice (Valentin, 2019). When looking into the college admissions process, it is important to look at the unique barriers for people with overlapping identities. First-generation is an identity for students that requires unique resources to ensure that these students are included in the college admissions process and retention. Intersectionality explains why the resources non-first generation students need in the admissions process is different than the resources that first-generation students need.

The Shadow Project is a way to eliminate the barrier of lack of resources and knowledge of the college admissions process. The University of Oklahoma (OU) has many high school students that come and visit to learn about admissions, financial aid, and tour the University. Among the schools that attended visits, my team noticed that it was typically the same higher-income schools. The Shadow Project was made to give students the change to learn that college is for them. First-generation students do not have parents to guide them through the process of choosing a college and applying to college. Some first-generation students may not even think that attending college is an option for them due to a lack of money or support. The Shadow Project aims to ensure that all the students left the day with the resources and confidence that if they choose to pursue college, they are able and have people who want to help them.

The Shadow Project helps to shine a light on the failures of the college admission process that for the most part ignores intersectionality. I noticed the importance of intersectionality and how to incorporate intersectionality to better help the students. “*Each of the students on the panel of first-generation students and each of the students from US Grant all come from different backgrounds. The panel consisted of different races, ages, nationalities. Also, they all had various amounts of academic success and familial support. These identities all come together and create unique barriers to the college application process. This is important to recognize that all of these unique identities create an individual experience for each student. When talking with each student and suggesting resources, it was important not to generalize, but to get to know the specific student’s individual situation. It is also important to have a panel of people with different experiences so that hopefully each student could connect with one of the stories”* (see Appendix A).

The Shadow Project is a great step in eliminating barriers for these first-generation students by giving them resources and connecting them to people who can help them through the process of applying to college. The limitations of the project are that it is simply only one day. One day is not enough to eliminate the barriers that these students may face. There is still educational inequality in the school systems. The project also does not directly help first-generation students stay enrolled through graduation. We hope that the resources given can give them a start and that universities begin to create programs to help these students.

Personally, one of the challenges that I faced in this project is that I would not be able to connect with the students because I come from a very different background than they did. However, the project ended up being a great learning experience. “*My mindset was to listen to the students and try to understand their experiences. I really enjoyed talking and getting to know the students I was able to interact with. I found that even though we are different, I was still able to help them find resources that they need and still able to have positive interactions with them. I also learned from them about the unique struggles that first-generation college students face. Overall, this project taught me how to interact and help people very different from me and to learn from those who are different from me”* (see Appendix B).

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Appendix A

Journal written after completion of the Shadow Project.

My team and I have just completed The Shadow Project where we invited to OU 20 high school seniors from US Grant who would if they choose to attend college, be the first in their immediate family. These students, along with their guidance counselor, attended a panel of other successful first-generation OU students, attended an OU class, and listened to a guest speaker discuss resources if they choose to pursue a higher education in college.

This project taught me so much more than I was initially expecting. Specifically, I learned about classism. Through talking with a few of the students about potential barriers they face when deciding to attend college, I realized how different my experience has been from theirs. My experience with college has been that I knew since I was a child that I would attend college. There was never a question about whether or not I would attend college. I was given tutors and classes to help me with the ACT to be accepted into whichever school I wanted to go to. My parents also invented in a college fund from the time that I was born to pay for my college. Truly there were no barriers for me to get to where I am now. I had only barely thought in the past how others have many more barriers to college than I did.

On the panel, there were a few first-generation students from low income families that shared their experiences with deciding to attend college. One particular story stuck out to me. This person thought that their only chance to attend a University was to join the military. It showed me that classism is a factor that plays into whether it is possible for a person to attend a University. I am very glad that I listened to this panel in order to better understand the barriers that classism brings to the decision to attend college. It is important for me to understand this to not only grow as a person, but also to better understand those who come from different walks of life than me.

I also learned about the HR Theory of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a theory that says that race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, nationality, disability, etc., all overlap on each other. This overlap connects them together and create unique forms of discrimination and prejudice. Through research of this project, and simply talking with first-generation students about their experiences, I have seen that the college admission process for the most part ignores intersectionality. Each of the students on the panel of the shadow project, and each of the students from US Grant all come from different backgrounds. The panel consisted of different races, ages, nationalities. Also, they all had various amounts of academic success and familial support. These identities all come together and create unique barriers to the college application process. This is important to recognize that all of these unique identities create an individual experience for each student. When talking with each student and suggesting resources, I made sure not to generalize, but to get to know the specific student’s individual situation. I am very glad we decided to have a panel of people with different experiences so that hopefully each student could connect with one of the stories.

This project will definitely help me with my future. My current plan after I graduate is to pursue my masters and become a licensed professional counselor. As a counselor, I am going to come across many different types of people who have had different experiences than me. I am going to have to empathize with them and understand their life situation. This project has helped me to empathize and attempt to understand one aspect of people who have had difference experiences than me. I am very grateful for the opportunity to learn from these students and to listen to their stories.

The most challenging part of this project for me was a disconnect with the students. I have a very different life experience than many of them and am not a first-generation student. I thought that this disqualified me from talking with the students because I did not want to pretend that I understood them or any of the struggles they face in the college application process. However, I changed this mindset into making sure that I was listening and learning from the students. I also was there to answer any questions they had because I have been through college and can provide them with my story of choosing a major and attending classes.

This project was very rewarding for many reasons. One of the most rewarding parts of the day was talking with their guidance counselor. She told me how grateful she was that we put on the project and how she was so glad the students had this experience. I am glad that we could help the school and show these students that higher education is possible for them if they choose that route.

Thank you Dr. J for all that you have done for our project. I have felt so supported throughout the whole journey. Now that the project is over, the biggest thing my group will need guidance on is the presentation. I would love some tips on how to give a great presentation and potentially do a mock run through to see how we can improve.

Appendix B

Second journal written after completion of the Shadow Project

Throughout the Shadow Project I was nervous that on the day of, I would not actual be able to help the students that came. I come from a very different background as these students and I am not a first-generation student. Because of this, I thought that the students may not want to interact with me or even would wonder why I am doing the project. I did not understand that I can still help people even though they are very different from myself.

Because of my worries, I decided to come into the project with a different mindset. My mindset was to listen to the students and try to understand their experiences. I really enjoyed talking and getting to know the students I was able to interact with. I found that even though we are different, I was still able to help them find resources that they need and still able to have positive interactions with them. I also learned from them about the unique struggles that first-generation college students face. Overall, this project taught me how to interact and help people very different from me and to learn from those who are different from me.

I think that service learning definitely should be a part of the HR curriculum. I was a little skeptical at first about how this project would help me apply my knowledge of HR. However, I learned so much about HR and I was able to see the HR theories that I have learned in action. I now feel much more confident to explain the theories because I have seen them first-hand.

In the Shadow Project, the HR theories that I saw most prominently were Labeling Theory and Intersectionality. Studies have shown that social class affects the way that students are labeled. This can lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy where the students who are negatively labeled perform worse or do not see college as an opportunity for them. Through the Shadow Project, we attempted to look at each student without any labels and ensure that all of them know that they are capable of achieving a higher education if that is what they want to pursue. I also saw the importance of Intersectionality by seeing each student as unique. Each student has their own experiences and it is important to provide resources based on the unique situation of the student. Students should not be stereotyped.

The advice that I have for future service learning students is to put in effort throughout the whole semester. It is much more manageable to start working on the project early rather than leaving important details for the week-of. For the most part, my group did a great job with this and it was not too stressful. However, if we would have left too much of the project for the end of the semester, I do not think that we would have had a successful project.

Another piece of advice that I have for future service learning students is to get to know your team. Our team bonded very well and we hung out outside of planning the project. I think that this helped our project run efficiently. Investing in your team members will help you learn from them. It will also make the whole project a memorable experience that goes beyond a simple group project.

Outline

Introduction:

It is necessary to study how classism affects first-generation students. Include the statistics that show first-generation students are less likely to go to college and matriculate.

1. Barriers Pre-college

a) Discuss college readiness with the article based on low income high school students.

b) Discuss Financial aid for first-gen students and the barriers they face in this process.

c) Discuss an argument for class-based affirmative action for college admission and financial aid.

1. Barriers in college
2. Cortisol levels higher in first-generation students.
3. The reasons for being in college different (independence vs interdependence) and this effect on the students.

Methods Section

Critical Reflection

References

Appendix (with journal 2 and 3)