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# Students Who Are the First Generation of Their Family to Attend College: A Comparative Study of Western Washington University Frosh

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Students Who Are the First Generation  
of Their Family to Attend College:  
A Comparative Study  
of Western Washington University Frosh  
(Report 1994-09)

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## Executive Summary

Information for this report was obtained from a study conducted to determine the relative level of adjustment to college of first-generation and second-generation freshmen at Western Washington University. The study utilized the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), a 67 item self-report adjustment measure. The SACQ is composed of a full-scale and four subscales: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and attachment to the school the student is attending.

The SACQ was administered to a randomly selected sample of 250 first and second-generation freshman students. Data analysis of survey results indicated that first-generation students do not measure significantly lower levels of adjustment than their peers. This finding is contrary to what would be expected from reviewing the current literature on the college experience of first-generation students. Literature suggest that first-generation students encounter a number of obstacles to college adjustment including a lack of emotional and financial support for college attendance, lower levels of academic preparation, and a lack of needed information about the college-going process. Findings from these studies indicate that such obstacles result in a lower degree of adjustment and thus a heightened risk of attrition.

However, results of this current study indicate that literature findings do not apply to Western students at this time. Possible explanations proposed by this researcher for the discrepancy encountered between this study and others include the high quality entry qualifications possessed by Western freshmen due largely to the selectivity of the admissions process, a lack of cultural dissonance between the environment and values students encounter in the home, at high school, and at college due to the relative homogeneity of financial backgrounds, and the accessibility of support services which may enable first-generation students needing help to find someone to support them in the attainment of their educational goals.

## Introduction

College admissions officers are concerned with the characteristics of incoming students and how these entering characteristics affect subsequent involvement of students in the academic and social systems of the college. Admissions officers are concerned not only with bringing students into an institution, but with what happens to those students once they enter college. Retention, and ultimately graduation rates give a four year institution an indication of how well it is serving its students in helping to prepare them for the challenges of life beyond college.

Over the years, many studies have examined specific subpopulations of the admissions pool to learn about the particular characteristics of these groups and to try and determine how to better serve their needs. In recent years, ethnic minority groups have received considerable research attention as have women and non-traditional age students. One group which has not been widely researched, but which is an important and growing component of the admissions pool, and an ever-more crucial component of the nation's future workforce, is first-generation college students. "First-generation" refers to any student who comes from a family where neither the mother nor the father received a bachelor's degree from a four year institution. "Second-generation" includes all students where either the mother, the father, or both parents received a bachelor's degree.

First-generation students are dispersed and subsumed within various sub-groups throughout the entire college population. As a result, first-generation status is most often treated in the research as a secondary or additional factor to consider when assessing a student's characteristics and/or needs. Usually, first-generation status enters the discussion when researchers consider the impact of belonging to a minority group or being a student from a relatively low socioeconomic background. While first-generation students are over-represented in both of these categories, they are not limited to them nor are their needs adequately addressed by narrowing the focus of research on first-generation students to the study of these populations. Rarely is first-generation status addressed as a primary focus of research. Any attempt to make it the primary focus will likely be complicated by the fact that very few schools can easily identify their first-generation students. While admissions applications routinely inquire as to parents' educational background, little follow-up, if any, is done to determine exactly how many of these students are at a given institution, or to learn what may distinguish these newcomers to higher education from their peers.

Western Washington University (Western) is no exception when it comes to a dearth of research information focusing on first-generation college students. However, such information is needed especially as the Office of Admissions moves into a more subjective applicant review process. During the 1993-94 applicant review, admissions officers made a very deliberate effort to inform potential students, parents, counselors and teachers that when considering the incoming freshman class, the Office bases decisions on much more than a student's index number (A number derived by the Higher Education Coordinating Board of Washington based upon a combination of high school grade point average 75% and standardized test scores 25%). Consideration of academic index number alone however, could potentially exclude a large number of students who would be both highly successful Western students and whose experiences, talents, and backgrounds could greatly enhance the learning of fellow students. Believing strongly in this principle, the Office of Admissions has made attracting a diverse student body an explicit component of its mission. If the student population were homogeneous in terms of background

characteristics, interests, and experiences, then interaction between students would add relatively little to their learning. If, on the other hand, there is a wide variety of background experiences among the incoming class, students have the opportunity to learn an immense amount from each other. Diversity thus defined, is not limited to ethnicity, but encompasses students with special talents, differing backgrounds, and special circumstances. First-generation students fall within this definition of diversity.

As part of this shift toward placing a greater emphasis on additional, and more subjective criteria when making admissions decisions, winter quarter, 1994, the office began to code all applicants according to generational status. All 1994 applicants who indicated on the admissions application that neither parent has a baccalaureate degree were coded "F" for first-generation. This new coding system is in its initial phase. The 1994 freshman class will be the first class where all students are easily identifiable on computer by generational status and where generational status may be a factor which is systematically weighed in the subjective review of application files. Since the office has not yet determined exactly how this variable will be used, or how much weight it should be given relative to other considerations, the present study of how generational status affects the college going process is both needed and timely.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is as basic as providing a needed piece of research information to the university. For the first time, Western will have identified how many of its freshmen college students are first-generation students and will have some feedback as to how these students compare with their second-generation peers in terms of adjusting to the university setting. Such feedback will help the university target particular areas where first-generation students may need additional resources and/or services.

Since Western is just beginning to code admissions applicants' generational status on computer, there was no quick and easy method of identifying first and second generation status within the 1993-94 freshman class. Therefore, generational status was determined through manual review of the parent section of the admissions application for the entire 1993-94 freshman class. This review revealed that within the freshman class totaling 1,471 students: 841 were second-generation Caucasian students, 375 were first-generation Caucasian students, 139 second-generation minority students, and 116 were first-generation minority students. Subjects were randomly selected in proportion to their representation in these four population groups until a sample of 250 was attained. This process created a sample of 143 second-generation Caucasian students, 64 first-generation Caucasian students, 23 second-generation minority students and 20 first-generation minority students. As mentioned in the introduction, no non-traditional (i.e. older transfer students with freshmen status) were used as age differences could confound the results of the study.

The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) was administered to the sampled first and second-generation college students. The SACQ was utilized because it is designed to assess how well a freshman student is adapting to the demands of the college experience. The SACQ manual explains that "underlying and shaping the development of the SACQ is the assumption that adjustment to college is multifaceted--that it involves demands varying in kind and degree and requires a variety of coping responses (or adjustments) which vary in effectiveness. Accordingly, each item of the questionnaire alludes to one of the many facets of adjusting to college and, either explicitly or implicitly, to how well the student is coping with that demand" (p. 1). The SACQ contains 67 items

falling into 4 subscales (academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and attachment to college in general and the student's institution). For instance, the academic adjustment subscale is measured in terms of academic motivation, academic application, academic performance, and academic environment. Students rank answers to questionnaire statements on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (applies very closely to me) to 9 (does not apply at all). On each individual item response, 1 indicates low adjustment and 9 indicates high adjustment. The sum of scores for all 67 items, the full scale score, is an index of overall adjustment.

With the assistance of Western's Office of Institutional Testing and Assessment, The SACQ was mailed to the sample population in early April. The instrument was accompanied by a letter informing students that it should require no more than fifteen to twenty minutes of their time to complete and urging them to be completely candid in their responses. Students were assured that all questionnaires are guaranteed confidentiality but that names needed to be included on the form to help researchers account for which surveys were received and returned. Pre-addressed, postage paid envelopes were provided for students to mail completed instruments back to the Office of Institutional Testing and Assessment.

## Findings

The SACQ consists of five basic scores: the full scale score based on 67 items and the four subscale scores each based on 15 to 24 items. As the student fills out the questionnaire, response items are transferred via carbon paper to the scoring sheet inside the AutoScore form where they appear as raw scores ranging from one to nine. Of the 250 surveys sent out, 106 usable surveys were returned resulting in a response rate of 42.4%. Returned surveys were then scored by hand using this AutoScore Form. This process involved transferring the circled values for each item to corresponding boxes. In most cases, the value is transferred to two different boxes: one for the Full Scale and one for a subscale. Once all Full Scale and subscale raw scores were transferred to boxes, these scores were converted to t-scores using the Appendix in the back of the SACQ Manual. The t-scores found in the Appendix are based upon the normative sample stratified by sex and semester. For this study, the second-semester norms were used since this was appropriate by test guidelines for students in the third quarter of their freshman year.

Generation, gender, and t-scores for all five scales were entered into separate fields in a data base resulting in a total of seven variables to be analyzed. Too few first and second-generation minority students returned surveys to use ethnicity as a meaningful variable. Once all the data was entered, a series of tests were conducted to see if significant differences existed in either the overall adjustment scale or on any of the four adjustment subscales: academic, social, personal-emotional, and attachment. Data analysis was conducted to determine not only if there were significant differences among first and second-generation students on each of the adjustment scales, but furthermore, whether there were differences as a function of the student's gender.

No significant differences were found between first-generation college freshmen and second-generation college freshmen at Western Washington University in either overall adjustment or in adjustment on any of the subscale measures. Findings would be statistically significant only if the measure of significance was .05 or smaller. The following tables display study findings on both the overall adjustment scale and each of the four subscales.

Table 1: Overall Adjustment to WWU by Generation

Generational Status	Mean	S.D.	F score	Significance
First-Generation	46.4	9.8	0.0378	0.8463
Second-Generation	46.8	8.6	--	--

As can be seen from this table, first and second-generation Western freshmen had virtually identical mean t-scores on overall adjustment. This same pattern holds true for each of the subscales as well. Subscale scores are included for the reader's reference. Possible reasons for these findings are discussed in detail in Chapter five.

Table 2: Academic Adjustment to WWU by Generation

Generational Status	Mean	Std. D.	F-score	Sig.
First-Generation	47.6	8.7	0.2205	0.6396
Second Generation	46.7	9.4	- -	--

Table 3: Social Adjustment to WWU by Generation

Generational Status	Mean	Std. D.	F.score	Sig.
First-Generation	47.9	11.8	0.0066	0.9356
Second Generation	47.7	9.3	--	--

Table 4: Personal-Emotional Adjustment to WWU by Generation

Generational Status	Mean	Std. D.	F.score	Sig.
First-Generation	46.2	10.2	0.0586	0.8091
Second-Generation	45.7	8.1	--	--

Table 5: Attachment to WWU by Generation

Generational Status	Mean	Std. D.	F.score	Sig.
First-Generation	47.5	9.9	0.7982	0.3737
Second-Generation	49.3	8.3	--	- -

### **Other Findings**

Interestingly, a significant gender difference was found on the overall adjustment

scale and on the personal-emotional adjustment and attachment subscales. In all these cases, males had significantly higher adjustment scores than females. While these findings are intriguing, it is not within the parameters of this study to attempt to interpret the meaning of these findings. All significant findings by gender are included in the following tables.

Table 6: Overall Adjustment to WWU by Gender

Generational-Status	Mean	Std.D.	F-score	Sig.
First-Generation	43.4	8.7	7.1399	0.0088
Second-Generation	48.4	9.5	--	--

Table 7: Personal-Emotional Adjustment to WWU by Gender

Generational Status	Mean	Std.D.	F-score	Sig.
First-Generation	42.3	9.4	10.9	0.0013
Second-Generation	48.4	9	- -	--

Table 8: Attachment to WWU by Gender

Generational Status	Mean	Std.D.	F-score	Sig.
First-Generation	45.1	8.2	6.2488	0.014
Second-Generation	49.7	9.9	--	--

## Discussion

This study addresses the potential obstacles first-generation college students may have to overcome in adjusting to the college environment and then provides several measures of the actual adjustment levels of Western Washington University freshmen.

The primary purpose of obtaining these measures was to assess how closely first-generation WWU students fit the profile suggested by the literature. Current literature indicates that differences in parents' educational levels, cultural capital, ability to provide an extensive range of support, and related differences in a students' academic preparation and self-confidence when entering college, all combine to produce more difficulties for the first-generation student in meeting the new challenges placed upon him or her by the college environment. The literature further suggests these challenges may grow to be so intense and overwhelming for the first-generation student, that he or she is at greater risk of leaving college.

The findings of this study did not support the applicability of this hypothesis to first-generation freshmen at WWU. The researcher examined both the number and composition of first-generation college freshmen to find out who these students were and to see whether quantitative measures would indicate that these students may be experiencing the sorts of adjustment difficulties expressed in the literature. Results indicate that WWU first-generation students demonstrate normal levels of adjustment in all measured categories as do their second-generation peers. By these measures therefore, first-generation students are at no greater risk of attrition than their peers.

Examining what each subscale intends to measure and then integrating subscale findings with literature discussion relating to the subscale realms may provide insight as to why first-generation Western Washington University freshmen do not appear to have more significant problems in adjusting to the college environment than second-generation students. The four areas which will be discussed in turn are academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and attachment.

### Academic Adjustment

The most crucial area of adjustment for all students is clearly academic. The ability to meet the demands of college level coursework is essential. Without a minimum degree of academic success as measured by grade point average, a student will not have the opportunity to persist toward the goal of a baccalaureate degree at a chosen institution. If a school has dismissed a student for academic reasons, the probability of being admitted to another baccalaureate granting institution will also be diminished.

Therefore, lack of success in the academic realm can potentially move the decision to persist out of the student's control. A student self-reporting an exceedingly low measure of academic adjustment during the third quarter of the freshman year, may be reflecting not only upon personal perception of one's academic performance, but also upon the more 'objective' measure of initial academic success, a two quarter cumulative GPA. If an institution finds a large percentage of any student population reporting abnormally low levels of academic adjustment, it has justifiable cause for concern and possible intervention. In fact, Baker and Siryk (1989), the developers of the SACQ write: Empirically derived behavioral correlates of this subscale (academic adjustment) indicate that lower scores are associated with: a lower grade point average in the freshman year; being on academic probation; provisional acceptance to college because of low grade point average in high school and low measures of scholastic aptitude; feelings of lack of control over the outcome of one's academic efforts; unstable and age-inappropriate goals; and less realistic self-appraisal (p. 15). In short, the consequences of low academic adjustment are more grave than low adjustment measures on other scales as the student may not be able to choose to persist if academic achievement is indeed unacceptably low.

Contrary to what reviewed literature would imply, both first and second-generation WWU freshmen measured normal and highly comparable degrees of academic adjustment. The SACQ manual describes the academic adjustment scale as "measuring a student's success in coping with the various educational demands characteristic of the college experience" (p. 14). The questionnaire authors further note that the subscale items may be classified into four item clusters and define these clusters as follows:

1. Motivation: Attitudes toward academic goals and the academic work required, motivation for being in college and for doing academic work, sense of educational purpose.
2. Application: How well motivation is being translated into actual academic effort, how successfully the student is applying herself/himself to the academic work and meeting academic requirements.
3. Performance: The efficacy or success of academic effort as reflected in various aspects of academic performance, the effectiveness of academic functioning.
4. Academic Environment: Satisfaction with the academic environment and what it offers.

Taken together, these subscale clusters provide the institution with a good measure of how the student is adjusting to various academic challenges. The study's findings suggest that both first and second-generation students are encountering success in meeting these challenges. To view the academic adjustment scale question items, please see the appendices.

While normative levels of academic adjustment for both groups is certainly good news for the university, what may account for this lack of difference between first and second-generation students? The biggest factor could be a lack of congruence between the precollege academic experiences of first-generation students described in the literature, and the precollege academic experiences of WWU first-generation freshmen.

Literature frequently attributes first-generation students academic problems to inadequate preparation. As a lesser percentage of first-generation students grow up with the implicit assumption that they will attend college, many lack an awareness of the importance of the curricular choices they are making at the middle school and early high school level. Failing to enroll in prerequisite courses to more advanced work, they enter college with less experience utilizing higher level thinking skills and generally possess less solid academic backgrounds. When studying first-generation students however, researchers seldom differentiate between individuals within this population. While the aforementioned obstacles may hold a great deal of validity and have a large impact upon many first-generation students, especially those coming from small communities with limited academic offerings and a small or non-existent professional jobs base, the applicability of these factors to WWU students is questionable.

High school teachers and counselors in Washington state have long worked together with students to develop four year curricular plans. While some students choose not to pursue a college preparatory route, all have at least been exposed to what is required to enter a four year higher education institution in the state. Admissions representatives

also repeatedly emphasize what kinds of preparatory classes are needed when they make high school visits. As mentioned in the review of literature, the WWU freshman class of 1993-1994 was in fact, the best academically prepared entering class in the university's history. The admissions office placed heavy emphasis on both student GPA and the nature of previous coursework. That 96% of the entering class met core requirements at Western speaks to the ability and preparation level of Western's students since Western is the only state school that currently requires a full year of either physics or chemistry. In short, academic histories indicate that first-generation students within the 1993-94 Western freshman class were academically very well prepared.

Another indicator that incoming WWU students would adjust well to the academic environment regardless of generational status is GPA. In an admitted class with an average high school GPA of 3.5, it is unlikely that the overall population of first-generation students would experience the degree of academic difficulty that the literature suggests first-generation students encounter.

Looking beyond measures of academic performance to academic motivation, application, and satisfaction with the learning environment, it becomes more dangerous to speculate as to why first-generation students measured comparable levels of adjustment with their peers. Billson and Terry (1982) did suggest that first and second-generation students enter college with similar expectations and goals. Where these researchers find first-generation students falling short is in the realm of what the SACQ labels application. Again, application is defined as how well motivation is being translated into actual academic effort. Billson and Terry found that outside factors such as the need to work long hours off campus resulted in lesser levels of actual academic effort despite comparable levels of academic motivation. Perhaps Western's first-generation students gather sufficient financial resources through summer jobs, part-time on campus employment, and various forms of financial aid to preclude the need to work long hours off campus. Possibly, Western freshmen's previous academic success has made them more realistic as to the type of academic commitment and application they will need to be successful at college. They may have already learned to balance their responsibilities in a manner that does not hinder their school work. Another plausible explanation is the nature of the study itself. Since this study was not longitudinal, students may simply not have been here long enough to experience the full weight of factors Billson and Terry suggest lead first-generation students to distance themselves from their role as students. Students who work long hours during the freshman year may not experience as much school-work conflict in trying to complete homework, as students in their junior or senior year attempting to manage job demands and upper division coursework.

Similar levels of satisfaction with the academic environment may speak to the simple fact that Western was the top choice of 79.5% of the freshman class (InfoFact, 1994). Hopefully this figure indicates that freshmen had researched the institution well, possessed knowledge of the programs offered, and had an idea of whether the academic environment would suit their needs before entering. While literature indicates first-generation students may suffer from a lack of adequate knowledge about college since parents are less able to provide information, high school outreach programs, college visitation days, and individual student and parent initiative may all counteract this supposed information gap resulting in students who come with a good sense of the academic environment they will encounter. These more obvious factors, plus others yet unidentified, may account for the lack of significant difference between the academic adjustment levels of first and second-generation students.

## Social Adjustment

Within Tinto's model of student departure, social integration is the twin pillar of academic integration. Operationalizing Tinto's model, the social adjustment subscale of the SACQ measures student success in coping with the interpersonal-societal demands of the college experience. It contains four cluster items:

1. General: Extent and success of social activities and functioning in general.
2. Other People: Involvement and relationships with other persons on campus.
3. Nostalgia: Dealing with social relocation and being away from home and significant persons there.
4. Social Environment: Satisfaction with the social aspects of the college environment.

From the profile of first-generation students presented in the literature, one would expect the greatest adjustment difficulties to come in dealing with being away from home and in establishing ties with other people on campus. For the first-generation student who feels guilt about abandoning family tradition by pursuing higher education, or who feels that he/she should have remained home to help support the family, such feelings may drain the student of the energy and will necessary to become fully involved in establishing new ties. Caught between two cultures, that of home and that of school, the student may find it difficult to function effectively in the social realm. This difficulty is further compounded for those first-generation students who find it necessary to work significant hours off campus to fund their education. These students are even less likely to become involved in campus activities which allow for a high degree of peer to peer interaction and the development of close friendships.

Western freshmen might not experience the degree of dissonance described in the literature due largely to the relative homogeneity of the population. With very few students coming from poverty level backgrounds, (again only 6.2% of students have an estimated parental income of less than 14,999) and with need-based aid available to those requiring assistance funding their education, students enter Western with comparable financial backgrounds and comparable potential to utilize the educational opportunities provided at Western. To the extent that income is related to the cultural capital that a student brings to school then, Western students come with similar background experiences allowing for an easier transition into the social realm of college life. Many first-generation minority students entering Western may also come from communities where they have been surrounded by white students in the classroom since they were very young. This may largely mitigate the culture shock of coming to a school dominated by white, upper middle class values. In short, students coming to Western may find they already have a lot in common with their peers and that the social structure of college life is not drastically different from that of their high school.

Such a scenario is much different than the reality of first-generation Hispanic students attending UCLA described by Mickelson and Rodriguez (1987). According to these authors, these students move from families holding low paying blue collar jobs, small communities, and high schools with limited curricula and little interaction with white upper middle class students, to a higher education institution filled with students from affluent families and privileged backgrounds. In California, where the Latino population is rapidly approaching the level of the white population, college may be the first time that

Hispanic students find themselves engulfed in white middle-class culture and a sea of white faces. The probability of feeling a high degree of social alienation in such circumstances is arguably much greater for the first-generation student attending UCLA than for the first-generation student attending Western.

Studies such as those cited in the review of literature confirm the importance of interaction with faculty to a student's social integration in the college system. Recognizing the importance of student-faculty interaction, one item on the social adjustment subscale asks the student to rate how closely the statement "I have had informal, personal contacts with college professors" applies. Satisfaction with social life may be attributable in part to Western faculty's student-centered orientation. Western faculty's prime emphasis is on teaching as opposed to conducting research. This commitment is evident in the faculty's commitment to serving as academic advisors, to attending campus activities, and participating in student-centered programming such as Summerstart. Students may enter Western either knowing, or quickly discovering that they have supportive faculty members to turn-to for both academic and personal concerns. The researcher also suspects that the sampled first-generation students' self-reported ease of transition into the academic and social systems of college is partially a function of the support/information gathered from formal and informal interactions with teachers prior to entering college. Teachers dispense information themselves and/or bring college representatives in to speak with their students as early as the eighth grade. First-generation students are not left without recourse in acquiring information on college. There are teachers who are willing and available to help gather information, offer needed support, and serve as role models and mentors. This may help account for the similar levels of social integration for both first and second-generation college students.

### Personal-Emotional Adjustment

The personal-emotional adjustment scale focuses on a student's intrapsychic state during adjustment to college and the degree to which the student is experiencing general psychological distress and any concomitant somatic problems. (Baker and Siryk, 1989). According to the researchers, lower scores are associated with: greater likelihood of being known to a campus psychological services center (this is in keeping with Piorkowski's research as well); greater emotional reliance on other persons; fewer psychological or coping resources; conflictual dependence on parents; lesser degree of mental health or psychological well-being, or greater degree of psychological distress, including anxiety and depression; and greater experience of negative life events (p. 15).

These behavioral correlates were amply evident in the first-generation populations studied by such researchers as Piorkowski, Gill, and Rendon. A high percentage of individuals within the populations these researchers studied had backgrounds characterized by extreme poverty, an inner city upbringing, and while some had experienced the physical loss of a family member, most had experienced a degree of emotional loss from watching either their parents and/or siblings become demoralized by blue collar work which was both unfulfilling and inescapable due to economic and educational constraints. While there certainly are individual cases of extreme economic hardship and extenuating personal circumstances among members of the freshman class, it is unlikely that these particular kinds of problems are as widespread among Western's first-generation students as they are

among first-generation students attending large urban universities or universities located near poor rural communities with a shrinking job base. Therefore, Western's first-generation students may have been spared a lot of the personal-emotional problems that can be associated with coming from a background of extreme poverty.

### Attachment

Finally, the attachment subscale is designed to measure a student's degree of commitment to educational-institutional goals and degree of attachment to the particular institution the student is attending. The two clusters within this scale are:

1. General: Feelings about, or the degree of satisfaction with, being in college in general.
2. This College: Feelings about, or the degree of satisfaction with, - attending the particular institution at which the student is currently enrolled.

In Tinto's model, a high level of integration into the academic and social realms of a specific higher education institution will reinforce and strengthen a student's attachment to the school and his/her determination to complete the baccalaureate degree at that institution, whereas a weaker level of academic and social integration will lower these commitments. Therefore, attachment can be seen as a function of the level of academic and social integration. Since both first and second-generation Western students measured normative levels of academic and social integration, it is in accordance with Tinto's theory that both groups also measured normal levels of attachment to their educational and institutional goals.

### Summary

The researcher has looked at findings from administration of the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire and proposed some explanations as to why these findings do not match what would be expected from a mere review of the literature. High levels of academic preparation and a lack of cultural dissonance between the environment and values encountered at home, high school, and college, stand out as factors which may account for similar measures on all adjustment scales for both first and second-generation college students. Additionally, first-generation students' needs may already be met by programs such as Summerstart which introduces students to the campus environment, each other, and available student support services, most notably academic advising. They may have found an extremely supportive person to guide them such as a resident assistant, a faculty member, or peer. Furthermore, enough of these students may have a strong enough sense of their educational goals and commitment to Western, that adjustment problems have been minimized. Limitations of the study itself were also mentioned as having some bearing on how the findings should be interpreted.

There are several limitations to the study which merit careful consideration before attempting to interpret the results and/or incorporate findings into daily practice. Most obvious is the small sample size. A larger sample and a greater number of respondents would increase the reliability of the findings. Also, in so far as data derived from a self-

report questionnaire is an accurate representation of adjustment level, it is accurate only in reflecting students' adjustment to Western Washington University. The SACQ is designed to measure adjustment to a particular institution. Findings from similar type institutions can be compared for informational purposes but findings from any one school should not be assumed to be applicable to the experiences of students at a different institution.

A further possible limitation is the timing of the assessment. Questionnaires were sent out early in the third quarter. Although the SACQ provides differential t-scores depending on which semester the instrument is administered, students who experienced severe adjustment problems may have left school before the survey was administered. Therefore, input from students who experienced the greatest adjustment problems are absent from the results.

Finally, one of the greatest limitations of the present study is that it is not longitudinal in nature. By tracking a given class of first-generation and second-generation students over their entire college experience comparing variables such as retention rate, average years taken to complete graduation requirements, and how frequently they utilized student academic and social support systems available on campus, the university would gain a much clearer picture of who these students are and whether their needs are being met. Not until these types of variables are explored will Western have a complete picture of the experiences of these students. In gaining a sense of the needs and identity of first-generation college students, studying adjustment levels is an important starting point, but it is just that.

From this point, numerous research possibilities exist relating to the experience of first-generation students. Longitudinal studies that examine retention rates, grade trends, and number of hours worked while attending school could be particularly helpful in learning about students' overall experience at Western. While the small number of first-generation ethnic minority students limits the validity of empirical studies on this population, focus group research could provide important insights as to what it means to these students to be the first in their families to pursue the baccalaureate and the types of frustrations and successes they have encountered. Looking at influential factors in the college choice process of first-generation students could also help higher education institutions to tailor services, programs, and outreach to the needs of both students and their parents. For instance, how crucial is the amount and type of financial aid received? Is distance from home a significant factor? Finally, an alumni survey assessing overall satisfaction with the entire college experience in which results are compared by generational status could help gauge how first-generation graduates view their decision to pursue a degree in retrospect and thus how likely they may be to encourage their own children to follow in their footsteps. The survey could question their motives when entering college, how these changed, and how well they feel their degree served them in the job market and/or in enriching their personal lives.

This study did not indicate that first-generation Western freshmen need additional services or programs. However, current efforts at earlier outreach especially to minority families who lack higher education as part of their history may mean that Western eventually finds many more first-generation students passing through its doors. In anticipation of such a reality, insight can be gained now from programs for first-generation students instigated at other schools. The programs described in the review of literature could provide an excellent starting point for action if further research suggests the need for a particular kind of service or program. If students are coming to school without adequate knowledge of how to optimize their college experience or even how to find needed

information, admissions officers and other initial contact people such as coordinators of student orientation programs may need to provide more general college survival information rather than gearing marketing information towards getting a student to come to a particular school. One practical procedure that could be adopted is routinely including at least two college freshmen in addition to the admission's representative at high school visits. These students could provide first-hand information and experiences especially for students who do not have parents or siblings to supply such information.

Appendix A:  
Copy of Survey



Applies Very Closely to Me ←      Doesn't Apply to Me at All

- 34. I wish I were at another college or university .....
- 35. I've put on (or lost) too much weight recently. ....
- 36. I am satisfied with the number and variety of courses available at college. ....
- 37. I feel that I have enough social skills to get along well in the college setting. ....
- 39. I have been getting angry too easily lately. ....
- 40. Recently I have had trouble concentrating when I try to study.....
- 41. I haven't been sleeping very well. ....
- 42. I'm not doing well enough academically for the amount of work I put in .....
- 44. I am having difficulty feeling at ease with other people at college. ....
- 46. I am satisfied with the quality or the caliber of courses available at college. ....
- 48. I am attending classes regularly. ....
- 49. Sometimes my thinking gets muddled up too easily. ....
- 51. I am satisfied with the extent to which I am participating in college. ....
- 53. I expect to stay at college for a bachelor's degree. ....
- 55. I haven't been mixing too well with the opposite sex lately. ....
- 57. I worry a lot about my college expenses. ....
- 59. I am enjoying my academic work at college. ....
- 60. I have been feeling lonely a lot at college lately. ....
- 62. I am having a lot of trouble completing my homework assignments. ....
- 64. I feel I have good control over my situation at college. ....
- 65. I am satisfied with the program of courses for this semester/quarter. ....
- 67. I have been feeling good lately. ....
- 68. I feel I am very different from other students at college in ways that I don't like. ....
- 70. On balance, I would rather be home than here. ....
- 72. Most of the things I am interested in are not related to any of my course work at college. ....
- 73. Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to transferring to another college. ....
- 74. Lately I have been giving a lot of thought to dropping out of college altogether and for good. ....
- 75. I find myself giving considerable thought to taking time off from college and finishing later. ....
- 76. I am very satisfied with the professors I have now in my courses. ....
- 77. I have some good friends or acquaintances at college with whom I can talk about any problems I may have. ....
- 78. I am experiencing a lot of difficulty coping with the stresses imposed upon me in college. ....
- 79. I am quite satisfied with my social life at college. ....
- 80. I'm quite satisfied with my academic situation at college. ....
- 81. I feel confident that I will be able to deal in a satisfactory manner with future challenges here at college. ....

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EXAMPLE

Appendix B:  
Review of Literature

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

### Introduction

As the pool of self-supporting jobs requiring no education beyond a high school diploma continues to shrink, the imperative of obtaining advanced education correspondingly grows. With the United States continuing its rapid shift from a manufacturing to a service-based economy, children who previously could have made a comfortable living following career paths similar to parents who did not pursue a college degree, find that this is no longer a viable option. Arowitz (1991) acknowledges that this is a relatively new phenomena since "for two generations, educational achievement was not understood to be the basic condition for achieving a decent standard of living. Until very recently, unions provided the moral and political equivalent of a professional credential for blue-collar workers" (p. 7). Then, he states, "the bottom dropped out" (p. 7). Fields (1988) notes statistics from the U.S. Commission of Education which echo Arowitz's outlook. The commission reports:

- the disappearance of 1.7 million manufacturing jobs between 1979 and 1985 meant a sharp drop in the number of well-paying jobs that in the past have been held by people without postsecondary education. Millions of new retail and service industry jobs that do not require post-high school training pay only about half of what the old manufacturing jobs did (p.27).

The latest census bureau figures show the average college graduate earns one and a half times as much as the average high school graduate (Wright, 1993, p. 9).

Econometric college choice models such as those designed by Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith (1989) assume that each individual student will attend a post-secondary educational institution if the perceived benefits of attendance outweigh the perceived benefits of non-college alternatives. Econometric models further hypothesize that the following factors affect the college choice process: expected cost (direct and indirect), expected future earnings, student background characteristics, high school characteristics, and college characteristics. The economic impetus to attend college is clearly present. Weighing variables in the equation of benefits and drawbacks of attendance versus non-attendance, increasing numbers of first-generation students are knocking on college and university doors.

A review of literature suggests that more studies need to be done on first-generation students. While qualitative research is plentiful, the quantity and quality of empirical research studies focusing specifically on the effects of student generational status is lacking. The existing literature does indicate, however, that there are differences between first and second-generation students that impacts the likelihood of success and retention of these students in the college environment. Factors impacting the persistence and success of students include parents' educational background, encouragement from significant others, previous academic preparation, socioeconomic status and resultant cultural capital. Each of these will be examined in detail within the larger context of Vincent Tinto's Retention Model.

### Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Retention is of utmost importance to those in the academic community for both altruistic and self-serving reasons. Retention of students is necessary to ensure the creation

of an educated workforce, to fully develop the potential of each individual student, to preserve the prestige and academic reputation of higher education institutions, and to maintain institutional financial viability so that future generations can be educated.

An esteemed and frequently referenced expert in student retention is Vincent Tinto. Tinto (1987) postulates that the decision to persist or drop out of college is directly related to a student's level of academic and social integration into the institution. Included in the academic realm is both academic performance and informal student interaction with faculty and staff. The social system encompasses both extracurricular activities and peer-group interactions. Tinto found that interactions in the academic and social environment either reinforced students goals and commitment to continuing schooling until completion, or led to a departure decision. If the student felt a low level of integration into the academic and social realm, then reinforcement of goals would not take place, commitment would weaken, and the probability that the student would leave correspondingly increased.

- Tinto's model is particularly relevant to the present study since it provides a theoretical structure for examining how certain combinations of pre-entry variables and institutional variables may interact to place some students at greater risk of dropping out than others. Additionally, it is specifically geared toward examining this question in relation to traditional age undergraduate students in a four year, residential university such as Western. Seeing what the literature suggests about first-generation students and then placing this information within the framework of Tinto's model provides insight as to why these students may require more attention within the college setting to insure initial adjustment and overall success.

### **Pre-college Characteristics**

Family background is a key component of Tinto's model. Family background characteristics include parents' level of education, socioeconomic status, the quality of the family relationship, and the interests and expectations of a student's parents. Literature addressing first-generation college students focuses heavily upon the impact family background has on the college experiences of these students.

First-generation students are often referred to as high-risk students (Astin et al., 1972; London, 1992; Padron, 1992 Richardson & Skinner, 1988). The label high-risk is applied broadly to first-generation students and does not necessarily mean that any individual student has had a troubled academic history. In fact, many "high risk" first-generation college students have stellar academic records. The label high-risk indicates that educators feel students in this category have certain characteristics or exhibit certain behaviors which lead to a greater probability of dropping out of the educational system than other students. Retention is seen to be an issue of greater concern for those labeled high-risk. To gain a better understanding of why these students are considered at high-risk for dropping out, some pre-entry attributes of these students will be examined.

### **Effects of Parental Education on Encouragement and Support**

The high-risk label is often applied because of the statistical impact having less formally educated parents has on a student's chances for successful completion of a baccalaureate program. Numerous studies have confirmed a positive correlation between parents' level of education and student success in college. (Anderson & Bowman 1991; Billson & Terry 1982; Mickelson 1987; Oliver, Rodriguez & Roslyn 1985; Pratt & Skaggs 1989; Sewell & Shah 1968; Tinto 1975, 1987; Skinner and Richardson 1988). Research supports the notion that better educated parents both hold and communicate higher educational expectations for their children, serve as support persons, and can supply needed information regarding the process of attending college. The positive correlation

between parent educational background and student success has been well documented. (Billson & Terry 1982; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Pratt & Skaggs 1989; Tinto, 1987).

One obstacle many first-generation students face is a comparative lack of support. Pratt and Skaggs (1989) found substantial differences between first and second-generation students in the importance placed on college attendance by their parents. Seventy-nine percent of second-generation students reported that their attending college was important to their parents compared to 64.5 % of first-generation students ( $X^2=23.4$ ,  $p<001$ ) ( p. 9). Similarly, Cibik and Chambers (1991) found that minority students, a significant percentage of whom were also first-generation students, reported receiving less help from family and friends in making the initial adjustment than did Anglo students. Uperaft, Peterson, and Moore (1981) found that family influence is especially important to freshman success. Families can provide needed emotional support and can help with career and other major decisions as well as with personal problems. Their work supported the idea that freshmen who maintain compatible relationships with their families are more likely to persist in college than those who do not. However, first-generation students may face more strain in attempting to maintain compatible relationships with family. Coming from less educated families, first-generation students often lack both the financial and emotional support needed to obtain a college degree. Parents of first-generation students may even be resentful towards a son or daughter who is breaking away from family tradition and entering the distant world of higher education. As Laura Rendon (1993), a former first-generation Hispanic student recounts:

I sensed that deep in my parents' souls they felt resentful about how this alien culture of higher education was polluting my values and customs. College was making me different. I was becoming a stranger to them, a stranger they did not quite understand, a stranger they might not even like (p. 2).

Similarly, Piorkowski (1983), found that low-income, urban, first-generation college students frequently suffer from "survivor guilt." Piorkowski writes that survivor guilt essentially refers to having survived when others who seem to be equally, if not more, deserving have not. Through counseling sessions with first-generation students experiencing college difficulties, Piorkowski discovered that with these students the issue is not

death in the physical sense but rather death or stagnation at the emotional level. . . Many have witnessed examples of psychosocial failure, such as unemployment, apathy, or chaotic interpersonal relationships. Many of these students are the only members of their immediate and extended families who are attempting to climb the socioeconomic ladder and improve their level of functioning. Often the students wonder why they should escape poverty with all its attendant ills when their brothers and sisters have failed to do so (p.620).

Low income, urban, first-generation college students attempting to become more successful than their families often have to deal with frustration, isolation, and criticism from family members. Piorkowski acknowledges that survivor status tends to create conflict since family members may feel threatened by a break from established norms and admonish those who "think they are too good for the family" (p. 621). Caught between personal academic goals and concern for the family, it can become extremely difficult for students to emotionally extricate themselves from family problems and pursue goals

without inner conflict. As the level of conflict rises, emotional/psychosocial problems grow. These problems may manifest themselves in the inability of a student to concentrate, poor study skills, depression, anxiety, and more frequent visits to on-campus counseling services. Struggling with conflicts about upward mobility, and lacking important sources of emotional support, these first-generation "survivors" deal with considerable external and internal obstacles while attempting to earn a degree.

Lack of strong family support may be compounded by fear of failure. Gill (1985) remarks that "First generation college students are plagued by the fear of failure. They, like their parents, avoid the possibility of failure by avoiding the very process for success" (p. 13). In making the case for the need to create a Special Services Project at Bowie State College, a school in which 73.7% of the undergraduate population is black and predominately first-generation, she argues that students must receive ongoing persistent counseling and advisement from college staff to ease their adjustment and to create a frame of reference which allows students to achieve the initial success so crucial to persistence. She notes previous studies addressing the specific counseling needs of first-generation college students, particularly those of Miles and McDavis (1982), which reveal that many black first-generation students don't recognize their own needs. They frequently arrive on campus with no clearly defined expectations of college life and inaccurate perceptions about the services available to assist them.

In their study on the effects of parental education on the attrition of first-generation and second-generation college students and barriers to college success, Billson and Terry (1982) found that there was a tendency for parents of second-generation students to provide a wide range of support--from financial and emotional, to a willingness to assist with such tasks as homework and transportation—whereas first-generation college students perceived their parents to be emotionally supportive, but not necessarily able or willing to provide them support in other areas.

The importance of family members communicating and encouraging the possibility of college enrollment early to first-generation students cannot be overemphasized. In a study examining how the family and high school experience influences the postsecondary educational plans of ninth-grade students, Hossler and Stage (1992) address what they call the predisposition stage of student college choice. This stage, as the name suggests, refers to the early part of the process when students make the decision as to whether or not to attend college. From their review of literature, Stage and Hossler developed a theoretical model of predisposition to attend college. In this model, family background characteristics were posited to influence levels of significant others' expectations for the student, student achievement, and degree of student involvement in high school activities. Family background characteristics, parents combined educational level, parents' expectations, and high school experience variables were all expected to influence the dependent variable, students' educational level plans. Their results corroborated the results of previous studies which concluded that higher levels of parental education, positive high school experiences, and parent expectations did indeed positively predispose children towards attending a postsecondary institution.

While their results are not surprising, an important, yet easily overlooked aspect of this study is that within Stage and Hosler's sample (n=3,84), 70% had established postsecondary educational plans by the ninth grade (p. 446). Ninth grade students have not had wide-spread exposure to college representatives, a heavy bombardment of post-secondary mailings, or counselors/teachers who make discussing college considerations a primary focus of their work. Therefore, the fact that 70% had established postsecondary

plans at this early stage, suggests the enormous influence of family background and resultant expectations. As a group, second-generation students especially grow up with the unquestioning belief that they will go to college. They always assumed they would attend. This assumption is often based on the mere fact that a student's parents are both college graduates and the child expects to follow a similar life course. Such early self-identification as a college-goer gives one a large advantage. It seems reasonable to speculate that students holding such views will be more likely follow a course of action leading to postsecondary success. In a sense, they are predisposed to enroll in college preparatory coursework, to tune into information informally disseminated by teachers who have first-hand experience to share with students about the college experience. Such students can more easily identify with the goals and aspirations of like-minded peers. Drawing upon the ideas of Merton and Kitt (1950), Attinasi (1989) refers to this type of process as anticipatory socialization. Merton and Kitt describe anticipatory socialization as the "premature taking on or identification with the behavior and attitudes of an aspired-to group which may serve the twin functions of aiding an individual's rise into the aspired-to group and of easing his adjustment after he has become part of it" (p. 5). On the other hand, it may be harder for a student whose parents' did not receive a degree to have this sense of early identification with college-going. As a result, this student may be less likely to enroll in college preparatory courses, note tips for success, or model successful college behavior such as strong study skills since the student lacks a similar sense of motivation or identification with a college going group.

Stage and Hossler (1989) investigated the relationship between family background characteristics, parental encouragement, and student educational plans. Their research confirmed their hypothesis that the father's education, the mother's education, and family income had a significant positive relationship with the parents' educational level expectations for the son or daughter. Discovering also that parents' expectations had the strongest positive influence on both female and male students' aspirations, they further noted that the father's educational level had a significant positive effect on the frequency with which parents discussed college with male students, but it did not significantly effect the frequency with which parents discussed college with female students. Therefore, first-generation female students may be at a double disadvantage because parents with less education will have correspondingly lower aspirations for their children; and for females in particular, be even less likely to discuss college with them--thereby denying them an important source of college knowledge.

### **College Knowledge**

Literature suggests that sources of college knowledge are more limited for first-generation college students. Generally, parents are not as knowledgeable about the school selection and admissions process. This problem is often compounded by well intentioned admissions officers who surmise that everyone has had some exposure to the academic arena and therefore do not adequately explain academic terms and jargon used in conversation and presentations. As Hikes (1993a) notes in his article on decoding the admissions process for first-generation families, the family without college as part of its background may not raise questions in a group setting because "they don't want to appear uninformed in a group where others are 'obviously educated' and they don't want to embarrass their children" (p. 11). Problems stemming from lack of information do not disappear once the student has been accepted and enrolls in college. Parents do not have first-hand information from which to provide new freshmen with tips on how to negotiate college systems or experiences to relate in adjusting to the first difficult semester away from home.

In their study of the occupational and educational goals of high school students, Haller and Woelfel (1972) define a "significant other" as "a person known to the individual, who either through direct interaction (definer) or by example (model) provides information which influences an individual's perception of himself in relation to educational or occupational roles or influences his conception of such roles" (p. 594). Borrowing Haller's concept of "significant others", Attinasi (1991) found that parents, high school teachers, and to a much lesser extent, siblings were definers with respect to college-going. These individuals communicated to the prospective student the fact that he or she belonged to the category of future college-goers and by sharing college knowledge, defined for him or her what it meant to be a college-goer. In addition, high school teachers and siblings created expectations with respect to college by modeling college-going behavior which provided insight into the nature of the college-going role.

Defining college knowledge as "a basic knowledge of the academic policies by which colleges and universities function" (p. 118), Anderson and Bowman (1991) found that first and second-generation students did not differ significantly on the amount of college knowledge, personal commitment to college, or perceived family pressure for college attendance. Finding no overall difference in knowledge levels, the researchers then conducted three one-way ANOVAs with perceived family support, relatives' ability to provide information, and college commitment as the independent variables and college knowledge as the dependent variable. A significant difference was found for perceived family support for college attendance ( $F[1,198] = 12.08, p = .0006$ ). Second-generation college students perceived more support from families for college attendance than did first-generation students. A one-way ANOVA on college knowledge by family support indicated a significant difference  $F(8,191) = 3.47, p = .0009$ . College students who perceived more support for college attendance had higher college knowledge scores than those students who perceived less support. Anderson and Bowman state that possible implications of this finding are that first-generation students may find college more stressful than second-generation students and that first-generation college students' educational paths may more likely be misguided because they may have less knowledge of or fewer experiences with college-related activities, skills, and role models than their peers. They suggest that this may partially account for the higher attrition rates among first-generation college students.

### STUDENT GOAL COMMITMENT

One conclusion which can be drawn from the preceding discussion is that parental encouragement often has a strong influence on the initial goal commitments of children with regard to the decision to attend college and the child's resultant preparation to do so. While Tinto includes the impact of family influence upon student intentions, goals, and institutional commitments in his model, he found in his studies that initial commitment to the goal of completing college or commitment to completing a degree at a particular institution had only an indirect impact on retention. If this is truly the case, then the importance of parental influence upon the formation of a student's initial college goals is diminished since initial goals and institutional commitments are only weakly linked to whether the student persists to obtain the baccalaureate. However, the research is not uncontested on this matter. In contrast to Tinto, Nora (1987), found that among a large sample of Chicano community college students ( $n = 3,544$ ), commitment to the goal of completing college and resolve to complete it at a chosen institution affected student retention measures significantly more than did academic and social integration measures. Students with higher levels of commitment to educational goals and to the institution they were attending, had higher levels of retention. They enrolled in more total semester hours, were more satisfied with their educational goal attainment, and earned some form of

credential. She further found that students who made better grades had higher initial institutional/goal commitments, as did students who received more encouragement from their teachers, counselors, parents, and relatives. Another finding of Nora's research may lead to the need to distinguish between two variables which have been treated as if they were synonymous in the bulk of previous research. Parental education level and parental encouragement of college attendance have frequently been viewed as one. Both have been lumped together as having a direct positive influence on the decision to attend and persist in college. However, Nora found that while parental encouragement had the predicted strong affect on a student's institutional goal/commitments, "students' initial commitments to the institution and to their educational goals were not affected significantly by their parents' education" (p. 51). She believes this may be because "for most Mexican Americans, education is highly valued, perhaps because parents who have not themselves earned a college degree provide strong incentives for their children to 'succeed' where they did not, or perhaps because parents who have earned a college degree expect their children to do so too" (p. 51).

In reporting their findings on students' level of commitment to educational goals, Billson and Terry (1982) draw upon the concepts of role distancing and role embracement as defined by sociologist Erving Goffman. According to Goffman (1961), "a person who embraces a role plays it to its fullest potential, takes the full set of rights and obligations associated with the role, and invests him or herself emotionally in the role" (p. 18). Looking at goal commitment from this angle, Billson and Terry found that first-generation students engaged in role-distancing in a setting that demands role embracement if educational goals are to be achieved.

Billson and Terry's analysis parallels a component of Tinto's framework in that it examines the affect of external commitments on a student's intentions and goal commitments once the student is enrolled in college. Billson and Terry found that commitment to the role of college student is less binding for first-generation students as demonstrated by the finding that those who withdraw are not as strongly convinced that college is the only or best route to life success. While first and second-generation students both enter college with similar expectations-- both groups value higher education for the opportunity to grow intellectually and the career preparation they anticipate receiving; and while both expect to attain equally high levels of education; Billson and Terry conclude that the lower level of social and academic integration experienced by first-generation students as a result of comparatively longer work hours, more off-campus commitments, a lesser level of involvement in campus organizations combine to create a "weak pull toward college, and a strong push away from it toward work situations" (p. 17).

As opposed to second-generation peers, first-generation students say they find career preparation and the acquisition of job skills the most rewarding aspects of college. Billson notes that while first-generation students pay verbal homage to the importance of an intellectual orientation to college, they are also more sensitive to the utility of career preparation through the college experience. Billson and Terry found that when first-generation students leave, it is more often to take a full-time job rather than to transfer to another institution of higher education. Among their sample, 57% of second-generation students truly dropped out as opposed to 84% of first-generation students. They also found that 25.4% of second-generation students who transferred enrolled full time while only 9.4% of first-generation students did likewise. Finally, their study revealed that for all of the aforementioned reasons, first-generation students were indeed at greater risk of attrition than second-generation students, and that of college leavers, more first-generation students exited the higher education arena completely rather than transferring to another

institution.

Using this concept of role distancing, Billson and Terry state that it appears that first-generation students who drop out of higher education have less commitment to the role of student and thus do not join, do not socialize, and do not study hard. While the major reason for second-generation students leaving is dissatisfaction with the college itself, its programs or its course offerings; Billson and Terry discovered that lack of commitment to college in the form of role distancing, coupled with lower academic rewards seem to be the crux in the withdrawal decision for first-generation students. Dropping out then, they note, becomes a logical consequence of role distancing in a setting that demands role embracement.

Uperaft and Gardener (1989), write that what is most influential in determining whether or not freshmen students adapt to their new environment is the important influence students have on one another. They state that "peer groups help freshmen achieve independence from home and family, support or impede educational goals, provide emotional support, help develop interpersonal skills, change or reinforce values, and influence career decisions" (p.10). If first-generation students are more prone to adopt a position of role-distancing, as Billson and Terry found, they will more likely miss out on this crucial interaction and experience more adaptation problems.

In contrast to all the aforementioned literature suggesting that first-generation students are at higher attrition risk, results from a study similar in design to Billson and Terry's but conducted six years later by Pratt and Skaggs (1989), indicates that first-generation students are not at greater risk of leaving college prematurely. The authors suggest that one possible explanation for this finding is that first-generation students are very aware of the opportunity for socioeconomic mobility offered by their graduation from college. This awareness may create a singleness of purpose compared to peers who have more diffuse reasons for attending college. Such an explanation is in keeping with Tinto's model in which the strength of goal commitments has a heavy impact on the student's decision to remain at a higher education institution until degree completion.

### **ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

A solid academic history is crucial to a student's successful academic integration at the college level. "A student's intellectual ability and previous academic history have long been empirically substantiated as the best indicators of academic performance in college" (Uperaft, Peterson, and Moore, 1981, p. 7). Successfully completed coursework in academically challenging classes at the secondary level, indicates the ability to perform well at the college level. Students who enter college with higher GPA's and standardized test scores, continue this pattern in college. This accounts for why colleges have traditionally relied so heavily upon grades and test scores when making admissions decisions.

Researchers frequently allude to inadequate academic preparation when enumerating the problems that first-generation students face at the college level. Having status as both a first-generation student and a minority student further enhances the probability that this topic will be addressed. In the studies covered in this review, the vast majority of researchers shared the view that one of the largest stumbling blocks in attaining the baccalaureate degree for minority students--a high percentage of whom are also first-generation students—is inadequate preparation for college level coursework. They suggest that inadequate preparation may result from a wide range of factors including counselors who steered students away from rigorous academic coursework toward vocational training, insufficient support for learning at home, students whose initial level of English language

proficiency precluded them from pursuing advanced coursework, or a lack of personal motivation (Astin 1972, 1982; Oliver, Rodriguez, & Mickelson, 1985; Richardson & Skinner, 1988). Regardless of the source, numerous students, both first and second-generation, minority and non-minority, do enter college underprepared and suffer from this lack of preparation. The problems may simply be more acute for those first-generation students who have insufficient knowledge of how to access and utilize available campus support systems such as tutorial services.

Despite this much discussed subject, only one study was found which specifically measured for differences between first and second-generation students in terms of academic course work taken in high school (including incidence of honors and advanced placement courses). Interestingly, findings contradict the widely shared belief that first-generation students enter college with significantly weaker academic backgrounds than their peers. This study by Pratt and Skaggs (1989) attempted to use this measure to help determine relative levels of academic integration. Their study revealed no significant differences between academic course work selected. Furthermore, they found no differences between the self ratings of first and second-generation students in terms of academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, and mathematics ability. Interestingly however, they did find that first-generation students reported more doubt that they were adequately prepared for college than did second-generation students. (46.4% as opposed to 39.3%) ( $X^2=3.79$   $p<.05$ ) (p. 32). This finding suggests that even when they manage to do quite well in high school and are every bit as qualified as their peers in terms of courses taken, grades earned, and test scores received; lingering doubt about their own preparedness may cause first-generation students to approach college with more apprehension than their second-generation counterparts.

Astin's (1982) work on minorities in higher education supplements the lack of empirical research on the relationship between academic preparation and college performance for first-generation college students. Although his study is not specifically focused on the academic performance of first-generation students, it is related in that it further corroborates the importance of strong academic preparation. Astin found that enrollment in college preparatory curriculum as opposed to general or vocational training is positively related to persistence for Blacks and Chicanos. He also found that college persistence is greater for Black students who have taken relatively many science and foreign language courses in secondary school.

### **Interactions with Faculty**

Establishing social relations with faculty as well as peers can make a student feel less intimidated and more at ease in the college environment. For the first-generation student especially, faculty can be invaluable as a source of support for the student's effort to pursue educational goals. Studies have confirmed that higher levels of personal contact with faculty result in an overall greater satisfaction with the college experience. Terenzini and Pascarella (1979) found student retention rates to be positively affected by "the nature and extent to which students relate to faculty and staff outside the classroom" (p. 32). Astin's early investigations (1968) revealed "Socially, they (successful students) formed relationships with instructors, identified mentors and advisors, and developed support networks with fellow students" (p. 37). This is in keeping with the studies of Richardson and Skinner (1992) who found that first-generation minority students reported the need to 'scale down' the social dimensions of the university and that they often accomplished this by "identifying some community of trustworthy and supportive people on whom they could rely" (p. 37). It is also in keeping with Tinto's model. As his model indicates, the depth of relationships with both faculty and peers will largely determine whether a student

will become more resolute in pursuing educational goals, or whether commitment will weaken and the student will depart from a particular academic environment. Finally, Padron (1992) notes the sentiments of Raul De La Cruz, a faculty member at Miami Dade Community College. De La Cruz believes:

while first-generation students may have unique problems, they also have characteristics that create positive interactions with faculty. They seem more receptive to alternative methods of teaching and teaming than students from college-educated families. Because attending college is not something that they have taken for granted throughout their lives, they frequently appear more motivated than other students. It is easier to be a role model for them (p. 75).

Therefore, the establishment of quality interaction both in and out of the classroom appears key to a student's social adjustment and integration at the college level.

While the above studies address the positive impact of interaction with college faculty on first-generation students, the researcher finds it odd that few studies have examined the influence of secondary teachers on first-generation students in particular. Few studies address the fact that first-generation students have college educated role models from the time they enter kindergarten. Teachers can and do provide students with information on college and how to prepare for it. Attinasi (1989) devotes two sentences to the influence of teachers on first-generation students and in doing so appears to pay more attention to this subject than the majority of his colleagues. He writes: Another source of descriptions of college-going was provided by influential high school teachers (mentors) who would relate their own experiences of and attitudes toward college, a 'mentor modeling' of college-going behavior. High school teachers could also influence perceptions of college-going by making prescriptive or predictive statements about what college-going should or would be like for their charges (p. 5).

For many first-generation students, teachers' college knowledge and support may adequately compensate for any information gap encountered in the home. It seems reasonable to surmise that students who have had mentoring relationships and informal interactions with teachers at the high school level will be more likely to continue these at the college level and have a higher level of social integration and satisfaction.

### **Socioeconomic Status and Resultant Cultural Capital**

Both Anglo and minority first-generation students often find themselves at a cultural disadvantage due to their comparatively lower socioeconomic background. Colleges are still predominately composed of middle and upper middle class students. Theorists such as Bourdieu, Bernstein and Passeron propose that a major reason middle class students tend to perform better than working class ones is that the former's cultural capital—by which they mean language styles, norms and values, knowledge base and symbolic reference system, as well as time and task orientation—is more closely matched to that of the teacher and the demands of the school system than those of their working class counterparts (Gorder, 1980). Factors within the category of social economic status which can put such students at a cultural disadvantage include low educational and occupational attainment levels of parents, frequent high-school noncompletion rates of one or both parents, low family income, larger family, weak family cohesiveness or single-parent family, and the lack of learning materials and opportunities in the home (Wells, 1990).

The problems created by moving between environments with different amounts of cultural capital are outlined by Rendon. She states that the very act of going to college indicates an interest in attaining a white-collar, middle-class position not previously

obtained by a family member and that this may take the student into "uncharted cultural territory". She states:

In the innocent belief that mobility is unproblematic, students are often unaware, at least initially, of its potential costs in personal and social dislocation. . . . It is only when they see that negotiating the cultural bstacles involves not just gain but loss --most of all the loss of a familiar past, including a past self-- that we can begin to understand the attendant periods of confusion, conflict, isolation and even anguish reported by first-generation students (Rendon, 1991, p. 12).

Working class students are more likely to experience a poorer fit, which makes learning and social adjustment more difficult. As Oliver, Roslyn, and Rodriguez (1985) conclude, "those students who have an early opportunity to learn the types of social and cultural skills and attitudes are more likely to do well in the university and adjust better" (p. 22). The vast majority of first-generation students do not have the luxury of this early opportunity.

Researching undergraduate Chicano students at UCLA, Mickelson and Rodriguez (1987) found that they were not the homogeneous population other researchers had treated them as, but rather fell into two distinct populations--what he labels the traditional group and the nontraditional group. The traditional group consisted of low income, first-generation students from Spanish speaking homes and neighborhoods. They were from the working class, were the first in their families to graduate from college, had few educational role models, and were not likely to receive either teacher or counselor encouragement to pursue a college education. The non-traditional Chicano students were from the middle or upper middle class, their parents were usually college graduates, English was spoken in the home, and they were raised in middle class Anglo neighborhoods and schools. Furthermore, they received teacher and counselor encouragement for pursuing higher education and went straight to UCLA from high school as opposed to transferring from a community college.

College grades were uniformly higher for the nontraditional group (above a 3.0 as opposed to greater numbers of the traditional group having a GPA of below 3.0). Mickelson and Rodriguez found that these differences related significantly to all other student experiences, but most importantly, to college performance and social adjustment to the university. They conclude that diversity in the Chicano undergraduate population suggests that special attention needs to be paid to the needs of first-generation college students. Students with college educated role models in the home or extended family may better understand the admissions and college-going process while the traditional student with no role model may require more in depth assistance and support during the admissions process. They suggest it would be especially helpful for traditional first-generation students to have academically able undergraduates serve as mentors.

As the preceding discussion demonstrates, a student's home environment has the potential to have a large impact on a student's academic history. As a group, first-generation students come from lower income families. This lower socioeconomic status often translates into a comparative lack of material resources that the student needs to be academically successful. Astin (1972) notes the conclusions of studies on socioeconomic class which suggest that homes of low socioeconomic status families "fail to prepare children for learning because they lack appropriate stimuli: books, toys, and instructional equipment" ( p. 16). It seems reasonable to further speculate that within such households, resources will be dedicated towards survival needs such as adequate food, clothing, and health care, and that what most educators view as necessary to the creation of a healthy

learning environment, a quiet place to study, a desk, reference books, may be viewed as desirable, but unobtainable luxury items which would divert needed income from survival needs.

Lack of material resources in the home can reasonably be assumed to be especially detrimental to low income first-generation students who live in school districts without adequate funding for materials and supplies. Middle and upper income students who encounter meager resources within the school can to a degree compensate through resources within their home environment. Homes may be filled with a full set of recent encyclopedias, a world atlas, dictionaries, ample work space, etc. Lower income students lack this ability to compensate if these types of materials are not available in their home environment.

### **Services/Programs Designed for First-Generation Students**

- Recognizing the many barriers to success first-generation students can face, many higher education institutions have instigated services to assist them, some of which are voluntary, some compulsory. Services targeting first-generation students at other institutions include mentoring relationships, special scholarships, bridge programs, tutorial services, leadership development seminars, and outreach activities. At the University of Delaware, the university's first-generation students are enrolled in the Student Support Services Program for a full year. The program includes ongoing tutoring, a one-year follow-up assessment, and full scholarships for an intensive five-week Summer Enrichment Program. In the summer program, students take two college courses with students who are second-generation students and develop college survival skills in a highly structured environment (Hikes, 1994).

Another program designed to build leadership, interpersonal, and goal-setting skills is a leadership academy for first-generation students at Earlham College in Indiana. The program includes tracking academic progress through weekly meetings, ongoing seminars, mini-service projects, and mentoring relationships. Kennesaw State College in Marietta, Georgia, a school with a large percentage of black first-generation students, has a highly respected mentoring program for first-generation students. For two weeks, "students meet with successful black professionals from the Atlanta area—primarily physicians, attorneys, business owners, and people involved in the mass media. Beyond the benefits of serving as positive role models, these mentors mold students' self-concepts and professional images" (Hikes, 1994, p. 7).

In addition to mentoring relationships and monitoring academic progress once enrolled, Hikes notes the importance of quality outreach programs. In his opinion such programs should "academically and psychologically prepare students for the college experience; familiarize students with institutions they might not otherwise consider; and contribute to the community through the development of its future leaders" (p. 7). He believes the standout program in fulfilling these criteria is at the University of Texas, El Paso where 60% of the student population is Latino and 3/4 are first-generation. Here, a college-awareness event is sponsored for first graders each year until they reach college age. At the elementary level events include guest speakers, UTEP summer programs for children, and family visitations. At the high school level, programming encompasses self-confidence building including practical skills like learning how to shake hands and look people in the eye; participation in the Lorenzo de Zavala legislative session to learn about state government and how to become a community advocate, and to identify issues of importance to themselves; and inclusion in a Young Parents Conference to learn strategies

enabling them to become both successful professionals and responsible parents (p. 8).

Finally, an example of programming for first-generation students closer to home is the KEY Program at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Evergreen's KEY program (Keep Enhancing Yourself) is a federally funded program designed to help students reach their goal of college graduation. The program admits 175 first-generation students with demonstrated academic and financial need each year. While faculty and staff can refer students to KEY, students must self-identify as being eligible for the program. Program services include needs assessment, academic and personal counseling, tutoring and mentoring, study skill workshops, as well as academic, financial, and career advising. Cultural enrichment activities are also an integral part of the program. According to Eddy Brown, Director of KEY at Evergreen, a student can utilize KEY's services on a daily basis or as infrequently as a once a quarter check in "to see how things are going". The program prides itself on changing and adjusting to meet the individual student's needs from the time of enrollment to graduation day.

As this brief review of programs demonstrates, ideas for programs for first-generation students abound. If Western recognizes an unmet need for these students, a broad base of programming ideas and options exist from which student development specialists can draw together pieces to create services tailored to the needs of Western's students.

### **Background Information on the 1993-94 Western Freshman Class**

(Compiled by Western's Office of Institutional Assessment and Testing and distributed in the 1994 edition of the InfoFact sheet)

Before proceeding to a description of the study itself, a brief profile of Western's freshman class may be helpful in promoting understanding of the sample being studied. While the following figures apply to the entire freshman class and not just first-generation students, these figures give the reader a clear sense of the cohort these students are a part of, and with whom they share several similar background characteristics. The 1993-94 class was the best academically prepared class in Western's history entering with an average GPA of 3.5. With a high level of competition for admission, (5,500 students applied for 1600 admissions spots) the background qualifications of the entering class rose substantially. There were 135 students within this class with a high school GPA of 3.9 or better and 28 students with a cumulative high school GPA of 4.0. Only 4% of the entering class was admitted with core deficiencies, meaning that 96% had satisfactorily completed all the high school course requirements deemed necessary to prepare a student for a successful academic experience at the university level. In addition, Western was the top college choice for 79.5% of entering freshmen, indicating a high level of initial commitment to the institution. Continuing a shift towards a more diverse student body, ethnic minority students comprised 17.2% of the freshman class. Finally, only 6.2% of the freshman class came from families with an estimated parental income of less than \$14,999. This statistic may differentiate Western's freshman from the vast majority of first-generation students studied in the literature who come from families with meager financial resources.

### **Summary**

The bulk of literature suggests that first-generation students have more potential obstacles to success than their peers. This in part accounts for the presence of programs described earlier which target the needs of these students. The cumulative research indicates that differences in cultural capital, specifically in parents' educational level and family social economic status, will be significantly related to a student's level of academic

and social adjustment to college. A greater perceived presence of supportive, knowledgeable role models, a closer match between the cultural capital of the student and the school, and more sources of college knowledge suggest that second-generation students will be more able to make and maintain a higher level of commitment to college goals, and be better able to negotiate college systems successfully.

Many more studies are needed to determine whether findings would be similar across institutional types and different types of students (particularly first-generation minority students as compared to first-generation non-minority students). A major aim of the present study as described in the following chapter is, in fact, to determine if first-generation students at Western Washington University fit the first-generation profile presented in the literature, or if they diverge from the suggested pattern. And if they do diverge, what factors may account for this variance? An increased knowledge of who these students are and whether they experience special or more acute adjustment problems, will help us to better serve this population.

Appendix C:

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