First-Generation College Students – Mentoring and Teaching Advice

First-generation college students, defined as “those college students who do not have at least one parent who earned a bachelor’s or higher degree” face tremendous challenges when entering college. It is highly likely this is their first exposure to a four-year university. They desperately want to blend into the campus but will be challenged by not having previous exposure to this environment. They do not want to be “called out” or “identified” by their status either. Below is advice for you to use when interacting with these students.

NEW for Fall 2012: The first-generation college student designation is readily available now in DUST. Advisors are encouraged to be aware of this factor when meeting with students as they will have different needs than others.

Mentor Advice:

• Suggest that students ask each professor for study tips specific to their class
• Encourage the student to join or form study groups
• Encourage multiple advisor/advisee meetings to discuss progress and transition each semester
• Be aware of the “imposter phenomenon” - anxiety about academic success is very high for these students - research shows that first-generation college students speak in class less frequently than others – they doubt their abilities and may even believe they are taking the place of a more worthy individual who was overlooked in the admissions process
• Be aware of possible pressure from home – their family will not fully understand the experience of the student – they may undermine the student’s motivation and confidence with home culture attractions or parental misunderstandings
• Encourage students to be involved in campus life – these students may find it harder to become involved with campus activities – both curricular and extracurricular
• Ask about work commitments – sometimes these students don’t have a good sense of how to balance work (earning money) with their academics
• Encourage the student to develop personal relationships with faculty and staff members – look for opportunities to pay special attention to the student during class time or to stop the student in the hall to exchange greetings and brief comments.

Teaching Advice:

• Be aware of our “Hidden Curriculum” – ensure students completely understand your expectations – don’t assume they are completely familiar with how to execute the work for the class. For example: do they know what it means to find something on reserve at the library or that it is acceptable to form study groups? You may want to encourage (or require?) them to take a library tour and familiarize themselves with other support facilities on campus.
• A few moments spent on suggested study skills needed for your class would be valuable for all students
• Suggest formation of study groups (if possible)