

Knowledge is Power: Utilizing the Theory of Margin to Design Effective First-Generation Student Supports

Executive Summary

Scholarly Context

This study took place within a threefold context – considering first-generation college students, nontraditional students, and TRIO Student Support Services. Because of the common intersection of first-generation and nontraditional student status, this study approached both factors together rather than in isolation to examine the influence of traditional or nontraditional status on first-generation students. Furthermore, because first-generation students are more likely than their continuing-generation peers to be nontraditional, TRIO SSS programs serve a significant number of nontraditional students and therefore, offered a relevant context in which to study both traditional and nontraditional first-generation students.

The theoretical framework for the study was Howard McClusky's theory of margin. McClusky (1963) posited that margin in life occurs when an individual has a surplus of power above load; with power defined as "the resources, abilities, possessions, allies, etc. which a person can command" (McClusky, 1971, p. 7) and load defined as "the self and social demands on a person in order for him to maintain a minimal level of autonomy" (McClusky, 1971, p. 7). According to the theory of margin, individuals who have margin in life are able to invest their excess power in growth and development activities, including learning experiences (Main, 1979; McClusky, 1971).

Study Purpose & Design

The purpose of the study was to determine differences between first-generation student's margin in life scores based on traditional or nontraditional status, gender, age, income, employment, companionship status, GPA, and TRIO SSS participation level; and to identify common load and power variables of first-generation students and how the TRIO SSS program contributed to their power.

Methodology: mixed-methods study utilizing a convergent parallel design

Setting: a public, four-year, moderately selective, Liberal Arts University in the Midwest with a student population of approximately 5,600 students

Participants: a cross-section of first-generation undergraduate students from the university's TRIO Student Support Services program

Data collection tools: Stevenson's MIL Scale and a demographic questionnaire yielded the quantitative data; interview questions designed by investigator provided the qualitative data

Data analysis: Independent samples *t*-tests, one-way ANOVA tests and multiple regression; open and focused coding to analyze qualitative data and identify relevant themes

Research Questions

1. Do traditional first-generation and nontraditional first-generation college students differ in margin in life scores and subscale scores?
2. What is the relationship between margin in life scores and subscale scores and demographic variables?
3. What are the common load and power characteristics experienced by traditional first-generation college students?
4. What are the common load and power characteristics experienced by nontraditional first-generation college students?
5. How does participation in a TRIO Student Support Services program influence the power variables for traditional first-generation and nontraditional first-generation college students?

Findings

Quantitative Findings:

- There was no significant difference in the composite Margin in Life scores for traditional first-generation college students and nontraditional first-generation college students
- There were no significant differences in the health, self-confidence, interdependence, or religion/spirituality subscales
- There was a significant difference among the groups in the parenting subscale, with nontraditional students scoring higher than traditional students

Qualitative Findings:

- Traditional first-generation students reported family as load and power variable, and school-life balance as a load variable
- Nontraditional first-generation students reported family as a load and power variable; finances as a load variable; and intrinsic motivation as a power variable
- Participation in TRIO SSS increased the power of traditional and nontraditional students by the provision of tutoring and priority enrollment and through support from the SSS program staff

Implications

- Demographic variables that are often utilized in TRIO admissions/tracking have little influence on student's margin in life
- Programmatic elements should address lower parenting subscale scores for traditional students
- Practitioners should work to mitigate the negative effects of family while capitalizing on the positive effects of family
- Practitioners should focus on the development of their relationship with students