**To Work or not to Work: Student Employment, Resiliency, and Institutional Engagement of Low-Income First Generation College Students**

**Edward F. Martinez, Dolores Bilges, Sherrille Shabazz, Rhoda Miller, Elsa Sofia Morote**

**Abstract:** *This study examined the difference between the two college persistence factors of resiliency and institutional engagement for low-income first generation college student employment. Participants in the study consisted of 52 respondents to the Family History Knowledge and College Persistence Survey. Survey results indicate 50 students reported participating in some form of employment, with 9 students in work-study, 22 students in off-campus employment, and 19 students in both work-study and off-campus employment. Data analysis showed a significant relationship for resiliency and employment type, but no significant relationship for institutional engagement and employment type. These findings indicate students who balance academics and employment exhibit a higher resiliency toward attaining graduation.*

**Introduction**

Federal Work Study (FWS) programs were created by the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 to increase employment opportunities for college students. In 1965 the Higher Education Act was signed into law and FWS was incorporated into the federal student aid system. The initial intent of FWS was to generate employment opportunities for low-income students (Baun, 2010). Employment is a factor for a good number of college students. Many of them work to support their educational goals and most of that work is in the form of off-campus jobs (Baun, 2010). Perna, Cooper, & Li (2007) indicate in 2003-2204, approximately 75% of dependent undergraduates and 80% of independent undergraduates worked while enrolled in college.

Whether a traditional or non-traditional student, as college costs continue to rise, it may become necessary for more students to work while enrolled in school. Compared with their peers, first-generation students are employed more hours, have lower incomes, and have more financial dependents than their continuing-generation counterparts (Inman & Mayes, 1999). A traditional-age college student can be defined has a person attending college immediately after graduating high school. Horn (1996) defines a non-traditional student based on enrollment patterns, being a single parent, working full-time, having dependents other than a spouse, being independent from parents or receiving a certificate rather than the traditional high school diploma.

Though working while enrolled in college might have a negative impact on student success; resiliency and engagement may positively influence these working students’ outcomes. Hence, the researchers set out to answer the following question: What is the mean difference between employment type and the two college persistence factors of resiliency and institutional engagement among low-income, first-generation college students? The impact of any wages earned in the determination of future eligibility for financial aid may also have real implications for college access and success; in this study the researchers illustrate how resilient and engaged students who are low-income, first-generation and work off-campus are compared to those who work on-campus.

**Theoretical Background**

Economic constraints prohibit many colleges and universities from providing a high level of service to the various constituents within higher education without the contributions of effective student employees. Further, as tuition costs increase, student employment levels are likely to increase with time (Letzring & Wolff, 2009). Researchers Hammes and Haller (1983) suggest that undergraduate students who work part-time achieve as well as those who do not. Stern and Nakata (1991) found that 56% of full-time students at U.S. colleges worked while enrolled in their respective institutions. Astin (1993), however, reported full-time or off-campus employment as negatively related to GPA, overall satisfaction with college, and completion of the bachelor's degree. Conversely, full-time employment was positively related to endorsing the goals of being financially well-off, materialism, and being overwhelmed.

Researchers McCormick, Moore, and Kuh (2010) identified that first-year students were more likely to work longer hours, and to work off campus more frequently than other students. Relative to students who had a parent with a bachelor’s degree, a significant share of first-generation students worked more than 20 hours per week (20% versus 10% of first years and 39% versus 25% of seniors). The research further indicates that first-generation seniors were twice as likely as their peers with college-educated parents to work at least 30 hours per week (20% versus 10%) McCormick, Moore, and Kuh (2010, p. 190). Moreover, Lumberg and colleagues (2007) found that first-generation students had lower levels of campus involvement, peer interaction, and investment in learning, all of which can be further challenged by heavy student employment workloads. However, McCormick, Moore, and Kuh (2010) found that working either on campus or off campus is positively related to several dimensions of student engagement, especially for full-time students.

Regardless of its effects, the need for full-time student employment may continue to rise as financial need increases. Average tuition and fees at both public and private four-year colleges and universities rose 38% in the past decade (Boehner & McKeon, 2003). According to information gathered from the College Board and the Census Bureau, since 1981 the cost of a public four-year college education has increased by 202%, while the Consumer Price Index has gone up only 80% (Boehner & McKeon, 2003).

Studies on student engagement indicate that academic and social activities in college have been at the center of higher education research for decades (Astin, 1993, Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Within the college environment student engagement is a reciprocal relationship. Both institutions and students contribute to the environment for engagement and take advantage of engagement opportunities. Campuses must determine the most appropriate balance (Kuh, 2009).

Though colleges may provide the environment for engagement, financial need can limit first-generation students’ involvement in campus experiences as they invest more time off campus to support themselves and their families. In addition, Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation students were much less likely than their continuing-generation counterparts to be academically or socially engaged; they also had more negative perceptions of the college environment and were less likely to integrate their college experiences successfully. Furthermore, a study by Levin, Montero, Cerven (2010) examined working students in two community colleges and concluded that both positive and negative effects of engagement or lack thereof are dependent on student characteristics (e.g., age, academic background, domestic status, financial status, native language, and physical condition).

Studies on resiliency indicate students who display resilient behaviors possess the ability to “bounce back” from challenges or adversity and are able to cope with the stressors inevitable to college students. Further, research has provided sound evidence that resiliency can be taught (Benard, 1993, p.44). However, working full-time while being enrolled in college is one “risk factor” known to reduce the likelihood of persisting to degree completion (Phillippe, Gonzalez Sullivan, 2005).Working students continually have to decide which role (student or employee) to play in a life context (Smith, 2006).

Richardson (2002), tracked a shift from problem-based research to a more positive approach of resilience theory, proposing "there is a force within everyone that drives them to seek self-actualization, altruism, wisdom, and harmony with a spiritual source of strength" (Richardson 2002, p. 313). This force, according to Richardson, is resilience, which is comprised of three waves: first, the identification of resilient qualities; second, an understanding of the process of attaining these assets, which explains how assets break down and re-form; and last, innate resilience, that is identifying the motivation for resiliency through personal characteristics and the drive for self-actualization (Galligan, Barnett, Brennan, Israel, 2010).

In today’s contemporary college experience with so many college students working, it is imperative that faculty and staff become more informed about the relationship between employment and both student engagement and educational outcomes (McCormick, Moore, and Kuh (2010).

**Methodology**

In this study, we investigated the mean difference between employment type and the two college persistence factors of resiliency and institutional engagement among low-income first-generation college students.

Data for this study was obtained from the Family History Knowledge and College Persistence Survey (Miller, 2006). Approval for the Miller study was obtained from the Human Subjects Research Committee. Participants in the study were traditional-aged, low-income, first-generation college students participating in a Student Support Services program at a private, non-selective, tuition-driven college located on Long Island, NY. Of the 52 survey respondents, 50 students reported participating in some form of employment, with 9 students in work-study, 22 students in off campus employment, and 19 students in both work-study and off campus employment. Two students reported no employment.

An internal consistency estimate of reliability using Crohnbach’s Alpha model was performed on the 10 items of the Miller survey instrument that defined resiliency (reliability = 71%). A second internal consistency estimate of reliability using Crohnbach’s Alpha model was performed on the 11 items of the Miller survey instrument that defined engagement (reliability = 63%). The Crohnbach’s Alpha values “if” item deleted indicated no significant gain or loss in reliability percentage for any of the items in either variable.

College persistence is the continuation toward a degree in higher education. The two independent variables of the persistence factor were resiliency, defined as the ability to overcome obstacles, and institutional engagement, defined as the formal and informal relationship to the people and organizations within the institution. The dependent variable, the employment type factor, consisted of three levels: work-study, work off-campus, and both work-study and work off-campus. An analysis of variance was used to answer to the research question.

**Data Analysis**

A one way analysis of variance was conducted to evaluate the relationship between employment type factor and the variables of resiliency and institutional engagement. The ANOVA applied to this data yielded statistically significant results for resiliency *F* (2, 48) = 7.663, *p* = .001 (Table 1), as did a test for homogeneity of variance (Levene Statistic=3.95, p=.026). Results for engagement *F* (2, 43) = 1.53, *p* = .23, yielded no statistical significance.

Descriptive statistics indicated higher means for resiliency (*M* = 43, *SD* = 4.10) as compared to the means for engagement (*M* = 37, *SD* = 5.43). A mean score of 43 on a scale from 10 to 50 for 10 items measuring resiliency indicated the students agreed for resiliency. A mean score of 37 on a scale from 11 to 55 for 11 items measuring institutional engagement indicated the students slightly agreed with institutional engagement.

| Table 1  *Relationship Between Employment Type Factor and Engagement and Resiliency* | | | | | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | *SS* | *df* | *MS* | *F* | *p* |
| Engagement  11 items | Between Groups | 83.07 | 2 | 41.53 | 1.53 | .23 |
| Within Groups | 1109.36 | 41 | 27.06 |  |  |
| Total | 1192.43 | 43 |  |  |  |
| Resiliency  10 items | Between Groups | 202.46 | 2 | 101.23 | 7.66 | .00 |
| Within Groups | 607.67 | 46 | 13.21 |  |  |
| Total | 810.12 | 48 |  |  |  |

Additionally, a post hoc test was conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means in resiliency using Scheffe. There was a significant difference in the means between students employed in work-study and students employed in off-campus work. There was also a significant difference in the means between students engaged in both off-campus and work-study. The results indicate greater resiliency among students employed in off-campus work and both off-campus work and work-study, than students employed in work-study alone. The 95% confidence intervals for the pairwise difference, as well as the means and standards deviations for the three employment types, are reported in Table 2.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 2 |  |  |  |  |
| *95% Confidence Intervals of Pairwise Differences in Mean Levels of Resiliency* | | | | |
| Employment Type | *M* | *SD* | Work-study | Off-campus |
| work-study | 39.22 | 5.31 |  |  |
| off-campus | 44.05 | 3.58 | 1.16 to 8.49 |  |
| both | 44.79 | 2.64 | 1.85 to 9.29 | -2.17 to 3.65 |

**Discussion**

The study examined the relationship of low-income first-generation college students’ persistence in college while employed. The two college persistence factors analyzed were resiliency and institutional engagement. A statistical analysis was conducted to determine whether resiliency and institutional engagement have a significant relationship with low-income first-generation college student employment type.

Data analysis indicated a significant relationship for resiliency and employment type. Low-income first-generation college students are able to manage work and school. These students have the ability to “bounce back” and deal with the challenges while attending college. Since low-income first-generation college students are more likely to not have parental financial support, it is important for them to maintain either on-campus or off-campus employment. Analysis results indicate an ability to balance the role of student and employee in order to succeed in college.

We found that the low-income first-generation college students had a mean score of 37 which is in the “slightly agreed area” for institutional engagement. Based on the data, it was concluded that the participants are slightly engaged with the institution. The research showed that first-generation students had lower levels of campus involvement, peer interaction, and investment in learning due to heavy student employment workloads (Lumberg, et, al 2007).

The Post Hoc test concluded that students who engaged in off campus employment exhibited more resiliency then work-study students. The students who worked off campus had a mean of 44.05 compared to work-study students’ mean of 39.22. Low-income first-generation students who work off-campus exhibited the persistence necessary to earn their degree while balancing their course load and employment. It can be very difficult to be a full-time or part-time student and maintain employment, but these students are resilient. They are able to overcome obstacles because they are able to see the “bigger picture” which is the goal of graduation.

The data suggests that students who work either on- or off- campus have a slight positive relation to several dimensions of student engagement (McCormick, Moore, and Kuh 2010). Low-income first-generation student engagement levels are slightly high, though not as high as resiliency when balancing work obligations. It is important for them to be successful students and be able to support themselves financially. Due to the increase of public four-year college education tuition, it is vital for low-income first-generation students to get a job and to maintain that employment opportunity while in school in order to assist with their bill (Boehner & McKeon, 2003).

 Even though Astin (1993) reported employment is negatively related to GPA, low-income first-generation students do not have the option to forego employment while attending school. These students are not receiving enough financial aid and/or financial support from home to cover their college expenses. Therefore, working while in school is the only way for them to persist to graduation. While working their way through school, low-income first-generation students are resilient and engaged with the college and/or university community. It is important for faculty and administrators to provide support and guidance to low-income first-generation students through mentorships, tutoring, and campus programs. These efforts will assist them with retention and enrollment for low-income first-generation students attending a college or university.

**References**

Astin, A. W. (1993). What matters in college? Four critical years revisited. San Francisco:

Jossey-Bass

Astin, A. W. (1993a). Assessment for excellence: The philosophy and practice of assessment and

evaluation in higher education. Phoenix, AZ: American Council for Education and Oryx

Press.

Baun, S (2010). Working during college. In *Understanding the working college student* (pp. 3-20). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Benard, B. 1993. "Fostering Resiliency in Kids.” *Educational Leadership.* November 1993: pp.

44-48.

Boehner, John A. & McKeon, Howard P. (2003). A Congressional analysis of college costs and

implications for America's higher education system. Retrieved March 6, 2004 from

<http://edworkforce.house.gov/issues/108th/education/highereducation/CollegeCostCrisis>

Report.pdf

Galligan, S. B., Barnett, R. V., Brennan, M. A., & Israel, G. D. (2010). The

effects of gender role conflict on adolescent and emerging adult male resiliency. *The Journal of Men's Studies, 18*(1),3+.

Hammes, J., & Haller, E. (1983). Making ends meet: Some of the consequences of part-time

work for college students. Journal of College Student Personnel, 24, 529-535.

Horn, L. (1996). Nontraditional undergraduates: Trends in enrollment from 1986 to 1992 and

persistence and attainment among 1989-90 beginning postsecondary students (NCES 97-578). Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics.

Inman, W. E., & Mayes, L. (1999). The importance of being first: Unique characteristics of first-

generation community college students. Community College Review, 26, 3–23.

Kuh, G.D. (2009). What student affairs professionals need to know about student

engagement. *Journal of College Student Development* 50(6), 683-706. Retrieved

April 26, 2011, from Project MUSE database.

Letzring, T. D., & Wolff, L. A. (2009). Student worker free speech on the public campus: A new twist to a constant issue. *Southern Association for College Student Affairs, 28*(1), 5+.

Levin, J. S., Montero-Hernandez, V., & Cerven, C. (2010). Overcoming adversity. In *Understanding the working student* (pp. 43-66). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Lundberg, C.A.,Schreiner, L.A., Hovaguimian, K.D., & Miller, S. S. (2007). First-generation

status and student race/ethnicity as distinct predictors of student involvement and

learning. NASPA Journal, 44(I), 57-83.

McCormick, A. C., Moore, J. V., III., & Kuh, G. D. (2010). Working during college. In *Understanding the working college student* (pp. 179-212). Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Miller, R. (2006). The association of family history knowledge and cultural change with

persitence among undergraduate low-income first-generation college students. (Doctoral dissertation) Retreived from Proquest Information and Learning Company. (UMI 3213869).

Pascarella, E.T., &Terenzini, PT. (2005). How college affects students: A third decade of

research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Perna, L. W., Cooper, M., & Li, C. (2007) Improving educational opportunities for students who

work. E. P. St. John (Ed.), Reading on equal education, 22, 109-106.

Phillippe, K.A., Gonzalez Sullivan, L. (2005). National profile of community colleges: Trends

and statistics (4th ed.). Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

Pike, G. R., & Kuh, G. D. (2005). First and second-generation college students: A comparison of

their engagement and intellectual development. Journal of Higher Education, 76, 276–

300.

Richardson, G. (2002). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. Journal of Clinical

Psychology,58(3), 307-321.

Smith, J.S. (2006) Exploring the challenges for non-traditional male students transitioning into a

nursing program. *Journal of Nursing Education,* 45(7), 263-269.

Stern, D., & Nakata, Y. F. (1991). Paid employment among U.S. college students: Trends,

effects, and possible causes. Journal of Higher Education, 62(1), 25-43.