A REVIEW AND COMPARISON OF FIRST GENERATION STUDENT RESPONSES TO SELECTED SERU SURVEY QUESTIONS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes a selection of responses from the Student Experience in the Research University (SERU), administered at the University of Iowa (UI) to all undergraduate students in spring 2016. The purpose of this survey was to gather information about how students experience and engage with the university. This is a topical report presenting responses to selected questions in order to demonstrate the subtle yet important response differences between first and continuing generation students.

Why SERU:

- At UI SERU has been administered in 2013, 2014, 2016, and will be administered again in 2018, providing a unique perspective on how the undergraduate population engages with the university.
- SERU participants, when compared to the degree seeking undergraduate body in 2016 by ethnicity, level, college, and generational status, were found to be nearly identical in composition, lending support to the ability of the SERU to speak authentically to the student experience at UI.
- For the purposes of this report first generation students responded (28%) at a similar rate to that of the undergraduate body (27%) in 2016.

First Generation students at Iowa:

- Similar to nationally reported statistics, first generation students at UI typically lag behind their peers when compared across commonly reported institutional success figures.
- When we examine the most common figures for UI:
  - First generations students are retained at lower rates (-7%) when compared to their peers
  - First generation graduate within 4 years at lower rates (-11%) when compared to their peers

First Generation students at entry

- At entry UI first and continuing generation students are nearly identical when compared using high school graduating GPA, high school graduation class rank, and amount of hours accrued in core areas.
- The differences that are apparent are small and not entirely predictive.
  - First generation students enter UI with an ACT score that is lower on average (-2pts) than their peers
  - First generation students enter with more accumulated transfer credit than do their peers
- Similarly to current research literature we found that first generation students at UI reported:
  - Higher levels of concern associated with finances
  - Higher levels of job and family responsibilities as obstacles to their success
  - Higher levels of anxiety associated with tests and grades

First Generation student satisfaction:

- While first generation students report experiencing higher levels of obstacles at UI, they report similar levels of satisfaction to that of their peers
  - Satisfaction with academics: First generation 56% vs Continuing generation 58%
  - Satisfaction with value of education for price: First generation 40% vs Continuing generation 42%
  - Feeling valued by the institution: First generation 41% vs Continuing generation 45%

Further examination is needed to ascertain why first generation students, who are not unlike their continuing generation peers, continue to be retained and graduate at significantly lower levels. The SERU survey points to numerous small differences that may in aggregate have significant cumulative impacts on student success. By supplementing institutional data with SERU responses, policy makers can now use topical reports, such as this one, as a new starting point for making decisions and guiding new inquiry.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary........................................................................................................................................1
- Why SERU: ..................................................................................................................................................1
- First Generation students at Iowa: .............................................................................................................1
- First Generation students at entry.............................................................................................................1
- First Generation student satisfaction.........................................................................................................1
Table of Contents .........................................................................................................................................2
The Student Experience in the Research University Project at Iowa (SERU)..............................................3
- Overview ....................................................................................................................................................3
- The SERU Consortium ..................................................................................................................................3
- Methodology .................................................................................................................................................3
The Student Experience in the Research University Project at Iowa (SERU)..............................................4
- Response Rates: .......................................................................................................................................4
Defining first generation in this report: .........................................................................................................5
Similar at entry:...........................................................................................................................................6
Notable differences in commonly reported success statistics and SERU:....................................................7
Obstacles and help seeking behaviors: ..........................................................................................................8
Similar to their peers: ....................................................................................................................................10
Overall.......................................................................................................................................................11
- A note concerning the information contained in this report ..................................................................11
Overview

The SERU survey provides the University of Iowa with a systematic scan of the undergraduate student experience not easily obtained through other means. The survey is comprised of two sections, a “core” section that contains questions that all participants receive regardless of institution and a “module” section that is distributed according to the desire of the institution. The “module” section can be comprised of either a consortium crafted module (which is benchmarked) or a wildcard section designed by the administering institution (which cannot be benchmarked).

Findings from the survey are used to inform policy, address unique institutional questions, and support research endeavors across the campus.

The SERU Consortium

Based at the Center for Studies in Higher Education at the University of California, Berkeley, the SERU Consortium is comprised of top tier research-intensive universities interested in learning more about the student experience via a suite of surveys that are administered online.

Participation in the consortium enables the University of Iowa to:

- benchmark UI responses against a peer group of top ranked U.S. research universities
- participate in the construction, implementation, and administration of the survey instrument itself
- create powerful collaborations that shed light on policy relevant research
- participate in a forum designed to share best practices and enhance methods for evidence based management

Methodology

The SERU survey is administered at The University of Iowa during the spring semester to all degree-seeking undergraduate. After an initial back to back administrations in the springs of 2013 and 2014 UI moved to an every other year model, making 2016 UI’s third administration with a fourth to be completed in 2018. Participants are recruited through a variety of campus advertisements and electronic invitations. The SERU Survey employs a modular design in which all students are asked to respond to a set of core questions followed by random assignment to an additional specified module(s).

Topics include: time use, academic engagement (in class and out of class), evaluation of the major, financial concerns, overall satisfaction, student employment, perspective-taking, and perceived obstacles to academic success.
Response Rates:
21.4% of Iowa undergraduate students responded to the 2016 SERU administration. The respondent population was generally proportional to the profile of the undergraduate population enrolled during the spring 2016 semester. Students who are identified as international or African American are somewhat underrepresented, while students who identified as White are somewhat overrepresented. Similarly to many large scale internet based surveys, just over 66% of respondents identified as female and 34% as male, even though they are nearly equally balanced in the undergraduate population.
DEFINING FIRST GENERATION IN THIS REPORT:

In order to make accurate comparisons between respondents, a first generation status variable was obtained from university records, turned into a binary identifier, and added to the survey dataset post-collection to create accurate representation of the population in question. International students, as an artifact of their application, are not asked this question during their application process. Therefore, for the purposes of this report international students have been removed from all figures and tables.

When categorized generationally, undergraduate students respond comparably across many demographic groups. The similar response rates across these groups lend support to the ability of SERU to make generalized statements describing the responses of first generation students in aggregate.

It is notable that at UI 42% of students of color* are first generation compared to 25% of majority students. Policies that affect first generation students may disproportionately affect students of color.

*SOC – defined in for the purposes of this report as African American or Black, Asian, Latino(a) or Hispanic, Alaskan native or American Indian, Multi-Racial, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
SIMILAR AT ENTRY:

When examined, the profiles of fall (2012-2016) entering cohorts at UI show that first generation students enter the institution with similar levels of pre-collegiate achievement when compared to their continuing generation peers. The differences often amount to only a fraction of a point.

For example, while ACT scores for first generation students are lower than their continuing generation peers (-2pts), first generation students enter the university with higher amounts of pre-collegiate earned credit hours (+1.3 hrs.) slightly higher class rank, and nearly the same high school GPA.

These seemingly conflicting results pose more questions than answers and should be interpreted carefully due to their limitations. Student survey data offers Data from the SERU may offer additional insights not captured through institutional processes.

“Knowing that if I do make it through these four years successfully, that none of these obstacles will matter because I will have been the first person in my family to accomplish this goal.”
-First generation student at UI

*Units in this case refer to the number of years of high school courses completed in the core subject areas. See https://admissions.uiowa.edu/rai for more details
When viewed over time, institutional data reveals that although first generation students enter with similar profiles to their continuing generation peers, they are retained and graduate at lower rates, mirroring larger national metrics. This begs the question what is, or is not, happening at UI that is effecting the successful outcomes of first generation students?

This report supplements institutional data with SERU survey responses in order to examine generational differences in more depth, and as a result, a variety of themes begin to stand out. When examined through a generational lens, SERU responses show that first generation students respond to the survey in similar ways to what is currently found in research literature. Most notably being that:

- First generation students largely report growing up in a lower socio-economic class than their continuing generation peers.
- First generation students spend more time working and with their families which can leave less time for studying academic material, engaging with their peers, and taking part in the educational offering on-campus.

First generation students at UI report higher levels of concern associated with their financial situation. This concern coupled with working more hours than their peers can contribute to feelings of isolation and lack of ability to engage on campus.
OBSTACLES AND HELP SEEKING BEHAVIORS:
When examined in the aggregate, the summation of the subtle differences that can be identified in SERU between first generation and continuing generation students starts to build the scaffolding necessary to explain why there are differences in the more commonly reports success statistics.

- When asked about their help seeking behaviors, first generation students report lower levels of comfort being able to ask and find support for their academic course work.
- First generation students reported higher levels of difficulty in their assignments and taking part in their classes.
- First generation students identified their family and work responsibilities at higher rates when compared to their peers when asked about obstacles to their success.

The SERU survey allows policymakers to examine differences between first and continuing generation students that may go otherwise unnoticed.

“I learned that failure does not mean defeat. If you are trying your best and working hard, it is okay to not always have perfect grades.”

-First generation student at UI
“The most meaningful learning experience I’ve had was seeing how faculty and staff on campus can be accessible and willing to help.”

-First generation student at UI
While first generation students report higher levels of concern regarding a variety of aspects of college life, when asked about how satisfied they are with UI they still overwhelmingly report similar levels when compared to their continuing generation peers.

**Satisfaction with Overall Academic Experience**

- Continuing Generation: 2% Very dissatisfied, 2% Dissatisfied, 1% Somewhat dissatisfied, 6% Somewhat satisfied, 1% Satisfied, 14% Very satisfied
- First Generation: 1% Very dissatisfied, 1% Dissatisfied, 3% Somewhat dissatisfied, 3% Somewhat satisfied, 14% Satisfied, 14% Very satisfied

**Satisfaction with Overall Social Experience**

- Continuing Generation: 2% Very dissatisfied, 2% Dissatisfied, 6% Somewhat dissatisfied, 12% Somewhat satisfied, 26% Satisfied, 20% Very satisfied
- First Generation: 3% Very dissatisfied, 4% Dissatisfied, 8% Somewhat dissatisfied, 14% Somewhat satisfied, 34% Satisfied, 16% Very satisfied

**Satisfaction with Value of Education for Price**

- Continuing Generation: 5% Very dissatisfied, 5% Dissatisfied, 7% Somewhat dissatisfied, 16% Somewhat satisfied, 29% Satisfied, 13% Very satisfied
- First Generation: 8% Very dissatisfied, 8% Dissatisfied, 15% Somewhat dissatisfied, 30% Somewhat satisfied, 27% Satisfied, 13% Very satisfied

**Knowing What I Know Now I Would Still Choose to Enroll at UI**

- Continuing Generation: 3% Strongly disagree, 3% Disagree, 4% Somewhat disagree, 6% Somewhat agree, 20% Agree, 38% Strongly agree
- First Generation: 3% Strongly disagree, 3% Disagree, 6% Somewhat disagree, 8% Somewhat agree, 32% Agree, 34% Strongly agree

**I Feel Valued as an Individual**

- Continuing Generation: 3% Strongly disagree, 6% Disagree, 8% Somewhat disagree, 14% Somewhat agree, 34% Agree, 31% Strongly agree
- First Generation: 3% Strongly disagree, 6% Disagree, 11% Somewhat disagree, 14% Somewhat agree, 34% Agree, 12% Strongly agree

“I learned how to be part of something bigger than myself, whether that be in a student group or cheering on the football team.’

-First generation student at UI
In many ways, first generation and continuing generation student experiences are more similar than different: Student records reveal similar academic preparation; SERU reveals similar levels of satisfaction with academic and social experiences at UI, the value of their education, their choice to enroll at UI, and their sense of being valued as an individual at the institution.

However, student records also reveal significantly lower persistence and completion rates for first generation students. SERU doesn’t directly address why these students are more likely to leave without completing a degree, but it does reveal greater levels of financial concern, greater time commitment to jobs and families, and a somewhat lower sense of belonging on campus and levels of comfort in particular academic settings. These findings suggest that many first generation students may be faced with navigating a number of challenges that continuing generation students do not face to the same extent.

By allowing us to add student reports of their perceptions and experiences on campus, SERU also makes it possible to identify questions for further examination of institutional data, academic experiences, and support for student success. For example,

- Finances are a concern for all students. To what extent are financial concerns having a greater effect on first generation students? Are there particular financial aid policies and practices that might more effectively support student persistence and completion?
- What kinds of classroom practices best support first generation student willingness to speak up in class, seek academic help when needed, and take advantage of academic resources designed to support student success?
- What can the university do to better support the academic success of students who come to the university with significant job and family responsibilities?

A NOTE CONCERNING THE INFORMATION CONTAINED IN THIS REPORT

The Office of Assessment assists and makes available a variety of reports and dashboards based on SERU responses that will allow any campus partner to review the survey results for actionable data. The SERU survey can also be used to address research questions and has already been used in multiple publications. You can access a variety of completed reports at this website https://uiowa.edu/seru/seru-publications. If you have any questions or would like to review the data in more depth please contact the Office of Assessment.

To find more information about the services our office provides find us online at:

http://www.uiowa.edu/assessment