

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Are We Student Ready?

An Exploration into the Experiences of First-Generation Students at a Private, Business-Focused University

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This study explored the experiences of first-generation students at Bentley University, a private, business-focused institution. Through semi-structured interviews with eleven students, the research identifies common challenges and highlights the impact of university policies and programs on their success. The findings emphasize the need for tailored support for this growing demographic.

It is arguable that the past decade has been the most disruptive period for higher education since World War II. Enrollment managers have long anticipated an enrollment crisis, meticulously strategizing to address potential gaps. Nevertheless, the unforeseen impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and dynamic political environment introduced significant uncertainties regarding student enrollment patterns. Since the 2008 recession led to a markedly reduced birth rate, universities had anticipated a drop in the college-age population (Schroeder 2021). However, the pandemic accelerated these declines for both returning and prospective students (Howell 2022). Moreover, initiatives aimed at fostering a diverse and inclusive campus culture have encountered setbacks due to the Supreme Court's decision on Affirmative Action, opposition to DEI efforts on campuses, and delays in FAFSA processing at the federal

level. These elements have collectively created a challenging landscape in higher education, where leaders are finding it increasingly difficult to convey the value of a college degree.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of first-generation students at Bentley University to provide administrators with insight to what policies, practices, or conditions at the institution have supported the students' success and which have not. While there have been several programs recently implemented to support the recruitment and success of first-generation students, ongoing research into the success of those initiatives is being conducted by the enrollment management unit. However, the changing student profile and the absence of structured universal support services

called for the exploration into the needs of this population. Further, this research sought to identify patterns or themes in the experiences of students with varying levels of support.

The leaders at Bentley University, a private, business-focused university in Waltham, MA, have been focused on diversifying the student profile to both enrich the educational experience for all students, while also preparing for the 2025 enrollment cliff. The university prides itself on developing innovative leaders for an ever-changing global marketplace. More than 97 percent of graduates over the last ten years have found employment or enrolled in graduate school. *The New York Times* has Bentley graduates ranking fourth in salary after graduation (Henrichs 2023). However, the university is a predominantly white, male institution. In 2021, the university appointed E. LaBrent Chrite as the university's ninth president, and first Man of Color to serve in the role. Soon after, President Chrite, began a campus-wide effort to adopt a ten-year strategic plan to proactively address the changes facing higher education in the coming decade. The plan, *Falcons Forward 2030*, sought to harness its passion for innovation to counter the impending enrollment declines, questions of value, and "price point sensitivities" that the higher education landscape faces. One of the tenets of the strategic plan is to increase access and opportunity at the university for first-generation college students.

The university launched two financial support programs for first-generation students: the First-Gen Presidential Scholars program, offering full scholarships and wraparound services to high achievers, and the BentleyFirst scholarship, providing in-state tuition for Massachusetts students. While recipients of BentleyFirst must live on campus and can join first-generation programming, it lacks the social and academic services of the Presidential Scholars program. These initiatives increased the percentage of first-generation students to 23 percent and 25 percent, respectively, within two years and enhanced ethnic and racial diversity. Despite successfully boosting enrollment, it remains uncertain whether the university addresses the needs of this growing demographic.

Research Questions

This study was centered on addressing the following research questions:

- What are the experiences of current, first-generation students with varying levels of support at Bentley University?
- How have policies and practices helped to shape the experiences of current, first-generation students with varying levels of support at Bentley University?

Literature Review

First-generation students represent a growing subset of college students, yet persistently have lower retention and graduation rates than continuing generation students (Ishitani 2016; Pascarella, *et al.* 2004). Currently, first-generation students represent one-third of college students nationally, but only 27 percent graduate within four years (Whitley, Benson, and Wesaw 2018). There is a substantial body of research, beginning in mid-1980s, examining this population of students and the complex reasons why they graduate college at a lower rate than their peers (Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014).

Academic and Financial Preparedness

Many studies attribute first-generation students' difficulty engaging academically or socially to the campus environment to a lack of social or cultural capital (Almeida, *et al.* 2021; Richards 2022). Social capital theory (sometimes referenced as cultural capital theory) was first introduced by Pierre Bourdieu as the accumulation of knowledge, power, and status based on one's position in life (Fowler 1997). Researchers have used this theoretical lens to show that first-generation students are less likely to seek help from those in power, including faculty, staff, and administrators (Richards 2022; Schwartz, *et al.* 2018). These students also have a hard time acclimating due to unfamiliarity with the culture of higher education, from the administrative structure to the campus vernacular (Richards 2022; Schwartz, *et al.* 2018).

First-generation students often enroll in college without being fully prepared academically or financially. This means they require academic support, such

as tutoring or remediation and are dependent on external funding sources, including student loans. These findings illuminate one reason why first-generation students have lower persistence and graduation rates (Pascarella, *et al.* 2004; Terenzini, *et al.* 1996; Chen 2005). A breadth of research has sought to determine if it is students' characteristics and experiences before college, in college, or a combination of these factors that limit many first-generation students academically (Brookover, *et al.* 2021; Strayhorn 2006; Bel Scanlon 2020; Reynolds and Cruise 2020).

Research has shown that first-generation students are more likely to require remediation before enrolling in college-level courses, emphasizing the disparity in academic preparedness of these students compared to their peers (Engle and Tinto 2008; Warburton, *et al.* 2001; Wibrowski, Matthews, and Kitsantas 2017). These students also enter college with lower high school GPAs and standardized test scores, and often have enrolled in less rigorous high school classes, often because they didn't have access to them or because students were not on a pre-college pathway (Engle and Tinto 2008). While there is often an assumption that this lack of academic preparedness leads to lower academic confidence, students have a hard time connecting their academic performance in high school to their college preparation and, ultimately, career outcomes (Vargas 2004; Atherton 2014). This disconnect leads students to be confused by the academic challenges they face in the first year of college (Atherton 2014).

First-generation students are more likely to receive financial aid, including student loans, grants, and scholarship, rather than depend on family support like continuing education students (Rehr, *et al.* 2022; Furquim, *et al.* 2017). Research has also shown that first-generation students enter college with lower financial literacy than continuing-generation students. This is important to consider because even if first-generation students receive a full scholarship to attend college, financial literacy is required to budget appropriately to ensure the funds last for the entire term (Rehr, *et al.* 2022). With college prices are rising at rates higher than inflation, first-generation students are also accumulating higher

amounts of debt in pursuit of a college degree (Potter, Jayne, and Britt 2020). Because financial aid packages are often only provided a year at a time, there is a risk that students have less financial support after the first year (Salvesen 2019). First-generation students are also more likely to experience financial hardships, such as food and housing insecurity in college (Riddle, Niles, and Nickerson 2020). This culminates higher levels of anxiety and, ultimately, lower retention rates for first-generation students (Rehr, *et al.* 2022; Potter, Jayne, and Britt 2020).

The Intersectional Identity of First-Generation Students

First-generation students are complex and represent a variety of different backgrounds and identities. First-generation students are more likely to be Students of Color and from lower-income families when compared to the general population (Center for First-Generation Student Success, n.d.; Lohfink and Paulsen 2005). First-generation students also generally come from lower-income families where, on average, the family income is less than half of continuing generation students (Monday 2022). Consequently, first-generation students are more likely to work in college, which perpetuates the class differences between first-generation students and their peers (Engle and Tinto 2008). First-generation students are also more likely to speak another language at home. These intersecting identities, including race, gender identity, income-level, and first-generation status, are each associated with higher risk of leaving college without a degree (Bettencourt, *et al.* 2022; Whipple and Dimitrova-Grajzl 2021). However, even when controlling for these other identities, first-generation status is a unique factor that appears to impact a student's likelihood to succeed in college.

Understanding how the intersectionality of other first-generation students, including race, gender identity, and social class, has shaped their experiences at the institution, provides students a different perspective on their own college potential (Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014). In one study, discussion groups highlighted how those junior and senior college students who embraced

their unique backgrounds had higher GPAs than other first-generation students (Gurin, Biren, and Zuniga 2013). Another study by Stephens, *et al.* (2015) found that students who engaged in a brief difference-education treatment at the beginning of their first year at a private, four-year institution had higher academic achievement rates (*e.g.*, retention, GPAs) two years later than the students who did not receive the treatment. When first-generation students not only accept, but appreciate their differences, it can benefit their academic journey.

A Hybrid Social Identity

Despite their individually unique backgrounds, research shows that first-generation students have different needs in college than their continuing generation peers (Pascarella, *et al.* 2004; Monday 2022; Atherton 2014). First-generation students often struggle with adapting to the middle-class norms of higher education campuses (Bettencourt, *et al.* 2022; Olson 2014). Wildhagen describes the “hybrid social identity” that first-generation students must adopt to balance their “aspirations for upward social mobility with the need to overcome the cultural barriers of one’s class of origin” (2015, 299). Wildhagen’s research highlights experiences of this culture clash for first-generation students. A participant in this study discussed being invited to a formal dinner to celebrate first-generation students, complete with a string quartet (Wildhagen 2015).

This juxtaposition of first-generation students’ backgrounds and their new surroundings can be difficult for them to manage (Bettencourt, *et al.* 2022). Studies have defined these feelings as a variation of survivor guilt, or family achievement guilt. First-generation students cannot accept why they have an opportunity for upward mobility when others with their background have not (O’Connor, *et al.* 2000). Others feel that they are leaving their families behind (Covarrubias, Romero, and Trivelli 2015). This can result in feelings of anxiety, depression, and ambivalence toward their academic pursuits (Covarrubias and Fryberg 2015).

Padgett, *et al.* (2012) found that despite research expounding the benefits of interacting with faculty, first-generation students are often intimidated by au-

thority figures. Often students cannot even articulate why they are struggling to acclimate to college, as they are unable to define this cultural dissonance (Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014). Students noted that being different because of their race and gender identity is more commonly discussed on campus, but the class differences are not as noticeable and, therefore, often ignored (Wildhagen 2015). This hybrid identity is difficult for first-generation students who seek to adapt to the higher education culture. However, maintaining a connection to home is clearly important, even if the students’ families are unfamiliar with the college environment. The following section explores research that highlights how family involvement and support are important factors for first-generation students’ success.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory is generally used to assess the organizational culture of a university and the concept of isomorphism, where organizations tend to conform to a norm (Beckert 2010). This is apparent in university rankings systems, the pursuit of selectivity in the admissions process, and the academic arms race where universities become so focused on a standardized set of benchmarks that they fail to consider the needs of their students (Morse and Brooks 2020; Paterno 2021). Ironically, these same standards reward institutions for enrolling students from traditionally marginalized backgrounds, including low-income, first-generation, and Students of Color (Alon and Tienda 2005; Paterno 2021). While this conflicts conceptually with this study’s assertion that Bentley University’s students differ from those enrolled at peer institutions, it does explain more about the operations and decision-making within the institution. It also illuminates why there might be a fundamental disconnect between what students need to be successful and the operations of the university. Research related to Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure and Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement has sought to illustrate the connection between institutional actions to students’ persistence; however, the notion of isomorphism is absent from those studies (Tinto and Pusser 2006; Burkholder, *et al.* 2013).

Powell and DiMaggio (1983) have asserted that new institutional theory explains how, despite an institution's efforts to change, many conventional structures within the organization persist. When applying new institutionalism to higher education, it is important to consider that much of the admissions process is rooted in the historical concept of enrollment management, an approach that focused on the identification, recruitment, and enrollment of students with the least likelihood to fail (*i.e.*, leave the institution without earning a degree) (Hossler 2014). Even as diversity efforts increase, universities often continue to seek students who fit the institution's academic profile.

More and more, institutions are attempting to change their approaches to support first-generation students. A landscape analysis by The Center for First-Gen Student Success describes this shift as changing from “college-ready” to “student-ready,” emphasizing that institutions should be prepared for first-generation students, rather than the students become ready for college (Whitley, Benson, and Wesaw 2018, 8). The same analysis shows that despite 78 percent of surveyed administrators describing themselves as student-centered, 72 percent felt their institutions needed “significant improvements” to better support first-generation students (Whitley, Benson, and Wesaw 2018, 8). New institutionalism highlights how even with upper-level support, enacting change within an organization is incredibly challenging. This study was performed through the lens of new institutional theory, exploring whether or not first-generation students believe that Bentley University is supporting their needs. Said differently, is Bentley first-generation “student-ready”?

Extant literature illuminated the complex academic, financial, and social challenges that first-generation students face in college. However, many institutions are still struggling to move the needle on first-generation student achievement (Ishitani 2016). These students consistently have lower persistence and graduation rates than continuing-education students (Ishitani 2016; Latino, *et al.* 2020; Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin 2014; Warburton, *et al.* 2001). Knowing what the challenges are for these students and effectively removing barriers and

implementing effective support structures has proven challenging for higher education institutions. Each institution has its own culture and environment which can complicate identifying the first-generation student population's needs.

Methods

This research explored current, first-generation students' experiences at Bentley University and their perceptions on what is propelling or detracting from their success at the institution. The study was designed as a single-case study that was bound by time and place: enrolled, Bentley University first-generation students in Fall 2023 (Merriam 1998). While quantitative data can give some insight to Bentley University first-generation students, these students' perspectives cannot be captured using data points, such as GPAs and major selections. To better understand what is supporting or detracting from their success, it was important to include first-generation students' experiences at Bentley through their own perspectives.

New institutional theory suggests that even when organizational leaders desire change, implementing it can be challenging (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Bentley University has pledged to support first-generation students, but it's uncertain whether their current needs are being met. To see organizational change within the university, it is important to consider the perspectives of the students most impacted, otherwise change is just an idea rather than an action (Stieha 2010).

Using a maximum variation sampling approach, eleven first-generation students were selected. These participants were representative of the institution's first-generation population in race/ethnicity, gender, major, year in school, hometown, and scholarship recipients (*e.g.*, FirstGen fellows/BentleyFirst scholarship). Table 1 (on page 40) provides a demographic overview of the study participants with BF in the support column representing the BentleyFirst scholarship, FGPF the First-Gen Presidential Fellowship, and ATH representing a partial athletics scholarship. While the study did not seek out student-athletes, it felt necessary to include this is a type of support as the participant ac-

TABLE 1 ► A Demographic Breakdown of Study Participants

Student	Class	Major	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Support
Alpha	Second Year	Undecided	Black	Male	BF
Beta	Third Year	Data Analytics	Hispanic	Male	FGPF
Gamma	Second Year	Finance	White	Male	BF
Delta	Fourth Year	Accounting	Multiracial	Female	FGPF
Epsilon	Fourth Year	Econ-Finance	Black	Male	FGPF
Zeta	Second Year	Marketing	Multiracial	Female	N/A
Eta	Second Year	Undecided	Asian	Male	BF
Theta	Fourth Year	Data Analytics	Hispanic	Male	N/A
Iota	Fourth Year	Finance	Hispanic	Female	N/A
Kappa	Second Year	Undecided	Multiracial	Female	N/A
Lambda	Fourth Year	Marketing	Black	Male	ATH

knowledgeed the support he receives from his coaches and athletics staff. The students with N/A for support may receive financial aid but are not part of a specific support program.

Data was collected through individual, semi-structured interviews, conducted in person or via virtual meeting technology. The interview questions were developed using Astin's I-E-O model aligned with the research questions and to assess if Bentley University is first-generation "student friendly" (Astin 1984). The questions were grouped to explore areas including the students' backgrounds and motivation for enrolling at Bentley, their perceptions of the campus socially and academically, and what barriers, if any, they feel hinder their success at the institution.

This data was analyzed using an in vivo first-cycle coding approach to ensure the participants' voices remained central to the analysis. Next, those codes were organized into themes identified by eight *a priori* codes or three emergent codes. Subthemes were developed where appropriate. To increase trustworthiness and credibility, member checking was performed through

follow up emails to participants with an outline of the emerging trends that related to their interview.

Findings

This study found several common experiences amongst first-generation students, particularly those from historically underrepresented backgrounds. A visual overview of the findings can be found in Figure 1 (on page 41). Each research question was posed to consider the level of support the student was receiving from the university; however, when analyzing the data, no meaningful distinction could be made between the experiences of students receiving different levels of support. The first research question sought to examine the experiences of first-generation students at Bentley, generally. Three findings emerged related to the overall experience of Bentley first-generation students. The first is that Bentley first-generation students represent a variety of backgrounds and pre-college experiences. Many of these students represent different nationalities and are either immigrants themselves or are the children of immigrants.

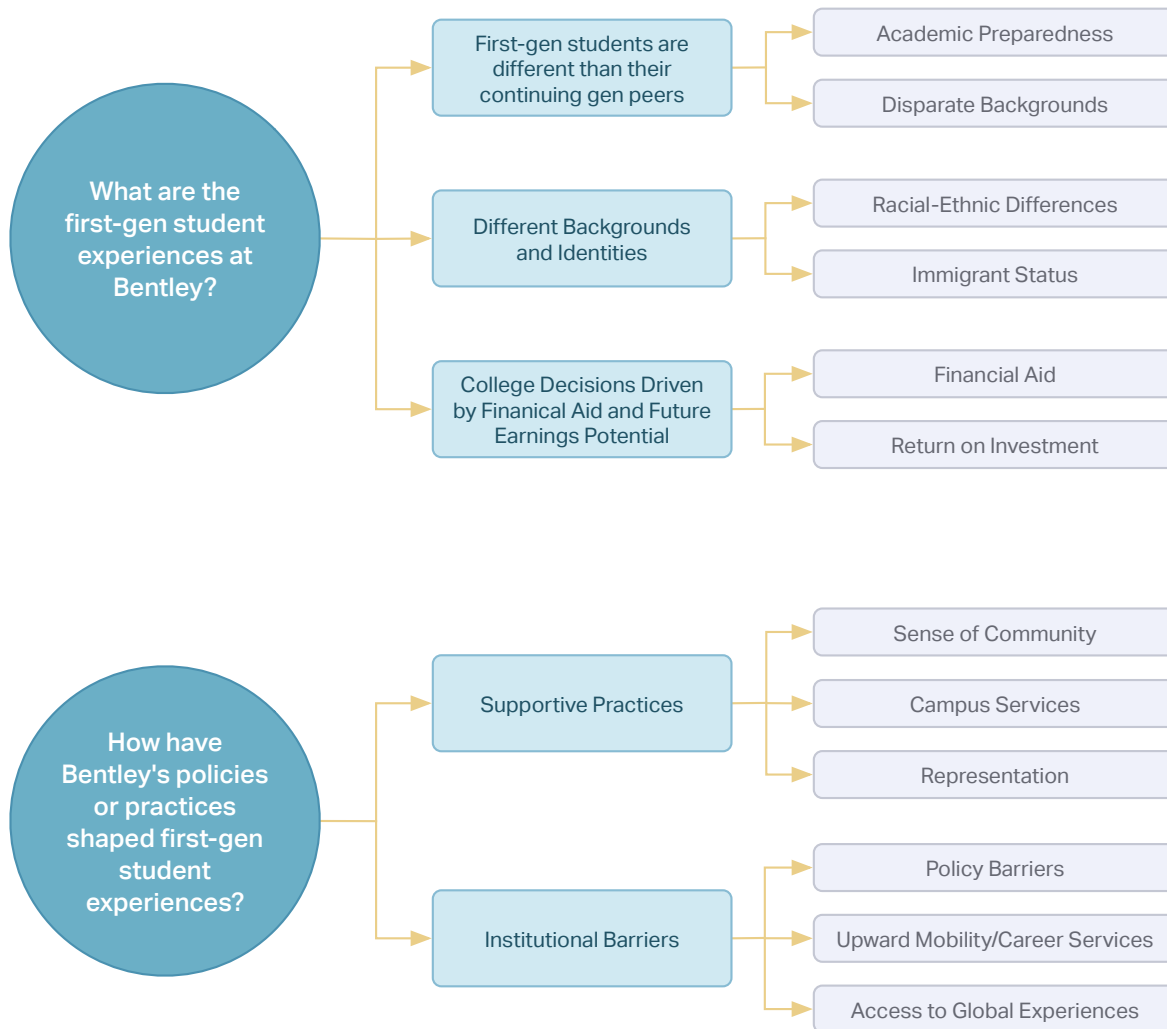


FIGURE 1 ➤ Map of the Findings, by Research Question

Additionally, the non-white first-generation students acknowledged the university's efforts to recognize first-generation students on campus, as well as an increase in the ethnic and racial diversity on campus. While first-generation status is not tied to a specific racial or ethnic background, the findings suggest that first-generation students from historically underrepresented backgrounds experienced Bentley differently than the one participant who is white. It is difficult to draw a conclusion from the experiences of one student; however, the fact that no other white first-generation students responded to the recruitment email also suggests that white students do not think about their

first-generation status in the same way as non-white students. Because of this finding, it would be worthwhile to research the experiences of all non-white students at Bentley to determine if there are commonalities that are not tied to first-generation status.

The second research question sought to identify the ways that Bentley has shaped first-generation students' experiences. Participants were asked to think about how Bentley's policies and practices supported them and presented challenges for their college experience. The findings indicate that the strategic goal of increasing diversity through recruiting first-generation students has led to a better sense of community and representation

on campus. Participants had mixed experiences when accessing campus resources. Several participants highlighted the supportive resources on campus as contributing to their success, including career services. Others noted that career-related practices led to feelings of inadequacy. First-generation students also struggled accessing several of the institution's high impact practices, including internships and studying abroad.

Level of Support

Outside of the differences in their financial packages, Bentley first-generation students' experiences did not appear to be impacted by the level of support they received. While the financial incentives of the First Gen Presidential Fellows program and the BentleyFirst scholarship certainly helped with the recruitment and, ultimately, enrollment of first-generation students, the students' experiences once they entered Bentley were comparable. There are certainly financial impacts, but often the students' financial aid packages were supplemented with other institutional aid or federal grants and loans. As such, the long-term experiences of students who did not receive the financial package provided by the FGPF program or the in-state tuition rates of the BentleyFirst scholarships may differ once the students graduate from college. These post-Bentley experiences could be an area for future research.

The level of academic preparedness seemed to be more aligned with the pre-college educational experiences of the students. Students who had attended private or college preparatory schools acclimated better to Bentley's academic environment than those who attended public schools in lower-income areas. Additionally, the challenge of navigating the university's career-driven culture was discussed by students across the three levels of support. Participants did share that foundational business classes, which are required as part of the core curriculum, were difficult as many faculty expected students to have prior knowledge of financial and economic principles. The only outlier was Gamma, the sole white male participant who admitted he did not identify as first-generation student as his mother had attended college in another country.

Disparate Experiences Persist

Bentley prides itself on its innovative business education and how that translates to the marketplace. The university has consistently ranked among the top institutions in job placement within six months of graduation. As such, the fact that first-generation students appeared to struggle most with the career aspects of Bentley is salient. Participants felt inferior to their continuing generation peers when navigating the career-related practices of the university.

Because the findings illustrated that first-generation students were unable to access high impact practices, a direct implication is that first-generation students were unable to compete with students from continuing-education families for internships, and ultimately, lucrative jobs. This is despite first-generation students having access to the same resources, or in some cases, supplemental resources. This is particularly compelling as the participants highlighted Bentley's job placement rate or average starting salary metrics when recalling the reasons they chose to attend the university.

Experiences Outline Institutional Gaps

The findings also identified gaps in policy that contributed to barriers for first-generation students at Bentley. Specifically, a lack of alignment between academic policy and federal financial aid guidelines resulted in students who rely heavily on financial aid having less flexibility in their academic choices than their more affluent peers. This was observed in scheduling choices, the opportunity to drop and add courses when academically appropriate, and the inability to participate in study abroad. These types of policy barriers can have a cumulative effect, as well. For instance, remaining in a course because of financial aid restrictions can impact a student's GPA. In turn, a lower cumulative GPA can limit opportunities to be invited to campus events or to join student organizations. Some of these policy barriers seem trivial, but when they build on each other, they can really impact the first-generation student experience at Bentley. While the gaps in prior knowledge and experiences could be explained by culture and social capital theory, this study was framed using institu-

tional theory. As such, it is important to identify ways that Bentley can mitigate these gaps to become more first-generation student friendly.

Recommendations

The implications outlined above identify what is and is not working for Bentley first-generation students. The most significant implication identified was that first-generation students experienced difficulty in two areas on which the university prides itself—foundational business courses and career development. The recommendations below outline opportunities for the Bentley administration to address the implications of this research and level the playing field for first-generation students.

Recommendation 1: Business Boot Camp: A Pre-College Learning Opportunity

The Mosaic program was praised as one of the best experiences for first-generation Students of Color. The first recommendation is to implement a similar program for first-generation students in the summer prior to matriculation to learn more about academic expectations, both generally and in the business core courses. This Business Boot Camp could be modeled like a LinkedIn Learning course where there are different modules provided for students. This could include a primer into the business core courses (*e.g.*, What is finance? Accounting?) as well as how a college course is structured compared to a high school class. There should also be career-focused modules that explain the career timeline for students, define key career development terminology, and provide opportunities for networking and interview practice before students arrive on campus. Also, engaging current first-generation students as leaders would help incoming first-generation students have a sense of community once they arrive in the fall. While it might make sense to include this as a part of the Mosaic program, it is important to consider that the Mosaic program and first-generation students are two different audiences, despite a large overlap between the two populations.

Recommendation 2: Address Policy Gaps

Policy gaps can lead to unforeseen circumstances for students. The findings exposed the cumulative impact of existing policies at Bentley for first-generation students. Two policies that were identified by the participants were related to the alignment of financial aid regulations and enrollment change policies, as well as the eligibility criteria for studying abroad. The university's drop and add deadlines lead to a disparate experience for students on federal financial aid. Similarly, the study abroad policy limits participation in global programs to those who are juniors or seniors. The number of upper-level courses offered through study abroad are limited, so students must use elective credits. Many students exhaust elective options in their first two years while exploring majors, so it is not uncommon that students will not have elective credits available in their junior and senior years. The findings showed that even First-Gen Presidential Fellows, whose scholarships will cover the costs of a term abroad, do not participate in these opportunities because the aid package doesn't allow the students to extend their enrollment beyond four years.

These are just two examples of the disparate impacts of the university's academic policies. It is not a stretch to assume that other policy gaps or conflicts exist. One area that was not explored in this research is the university's retention policies, simply because all of the participants have remained enrolled at the institution. However, this is an additional area where policies might lead to disparate outcomes for first-generation students. As such, it is recommended that the Bentley Academic Standards Committee perform a full academic policy review to identify and address gaps. The Academic Standards Committee is the faculty committee that reviews and recommends policy changes for undergraduate students. This review should identify instances where existing policies or gaps in policy (items not addressed in policy) may be contributing to the disparate experiences for first-generation students (or other underrepresented groups). This might include adjusting registration deadlines so that all students have the same opportunity to drop or add courses or reviewing GPA requirements for

student organizations to ensure they are inclusive and are not arbitrary in nature.

Recommendation 3: Expand First-Generation Career Pathways and Connections

The Bentley administration has already begun creating pathways for first-generation students to connect with representatives from business and industry. In late fall 2023, Bentley announced a partnership with Deloitte Consulting, that includes mentoring first-generation students. This aligns with a suggestion from one of the participants in the study. The participant encouraged Bentley to provide opportunities where first-generation students can connect with hiring professionals without being compared to “the next guy whose dad has worked at Fidelity for years.” While this partnership with Deloitte is very new, it addresses one of the findings in this study. As such, this recommendation is to expand on these opportunities for first-generation students. It is necessary to continue to develop other pathways so that first-generation students majoring in something other than finance or accounting can establish connections and build their network.

Recommendation 4: Increase Awareness of Events and Resources

Several participants shared that they were not aware of the many events and institutional practices specifically designed for first-generation students. This is, in part, because the university relies heavily on email to communicate with students, and email outreach is largely ineffective. It could also be that the university is trying not to alienate Bentley students from traditional college-going backgrounds by using targeted outreach strategies. However, the participants acknowledged that they would likely attend these events and even suggested creating new programs to help first-generation students understand the university culture better, such as navigating financial aid, planning for study abroad, or opportunities to connect with other first-generation students.

The findings also revealed that first-generation students felt intimidated accessing some of the academic

resources on campus, including the tutoring centers. This recommendation includes identifying better platforms for communicating events to students, using upperclassmen to help spread the word, and establishing first-generation representatives for different campus resources, including student liaisons for each academic center (*e.g.*, Writing Center, Math Learning Center) and staff who serve as a first-generation student point of contact for campus offices, including academic advising, the registrar’s office, or financial aid.

Conclusion

The strategic initiative to increase first-generation student enrollment at Bentley has been incredibly successful in diversifying the student body. The financial support programs and programmatic initiatives have been well-received by first-generation students and in many cases influenced their decision to attend Bentley. First-generation students noted that Bentley’s reputation for professional outcomes played a large part in the college decision process. While the first-generation students in the study have learned to navigate the campus and have figured out their path, it is important to recognize that there are still areas where Bentley can better support and increase opportunities for first-generation students. Many participants acknowledged that they learned about resources or opportunities, such as high impact practice opportunities (*e.g.*, internships, global education), much later than their peers. Bridging the knowledge gaps between first-generation students and the students whose parents who attended college are imperative to improving the Bentley experience for first-generation students.

Continued research into the experiences of first-generation students is recommended, particularly as the support programs mature and as institutional changes are made to support this population. Ultimately, first-generation student success will be achieved when these students can equitably access the same opportunities as traditional Bentley students. However, the path to success may look different for each first-generation student.

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About the Author



Aimee Leturmy

Aimee Leturmy has more than 20 years of experience working in higher education. She

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Leturmy started her career in college athletics in athletics media relations at Southern Methodist University. After earning her master's degree, she worked in the Athletics Compliance office at the University of Central Florida Athletic Association. She joined the FSU Registrar's Office in

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In addition to her employment experiences, Leturmy served as the Vice President for Member Relations and Communication of the Florida Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (FACRAO) and has become actively involved with AACRAO.