

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

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This exploratory study examines the difference between two college persistence factors—resiliency and institutional engagement—for low-income, working, first-generation college students. Participants in the study consisted of 52 respondents to the Family History Knowledge and College Persistence Survey. Among 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. Data analysis shows a significant relationship between resiliency and employment type, but no significant relationship between institutional engagement and employment type. Our findings indicate students who balance academics and employment exhibit a higher resiliency toward attaining graduation.

The Federal Work Study (FWS) program was originally created by The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to increase employment opportunities for college students. When the Higher Education Act (HEA) of 1965 was signed into law, FWS was incorporated into the federal student aid system. The initial intent of FWS was to generate employment opportunities for low-income college students (Baum, 2010). Many low-income students work to support their educational goals and much of that work is in the form of off-campus jobs (Baum, 2010). Perna, Cooper, and Li (2007) found approximately 75% of dependent undergraduates and 80% of independent undergraduates worked while enrolled in college during 2003-2004.

As college costs continue to rise, more students may find it necessary to work while enrolled in school. Compared with their peers, first-generation students tend to be employed more hours, have lower incomes, and are more likely to have financial dependents than their non-first generation counterparts (Inman & Mayes, 1999). Though working while enrolled in college might have a negative impact on student success, resiliency and engagement may positively influence these working students' outcomes. This study explores the following question: Is there a difference by employment type with respect to resiliency and institutional engagement among low-income, first-generation college students? To answer this question, researchers studied the resiliency and engagement of low-income, first-generation students working off campus compared with those students working on campus.

Theoretical Background

The relationship between academic performance, working while enrolled, and hours worked is a matter of debate in the research literature. For example, Hammes and Haller (1983) suggest that undergraduate students who work part-time perform than those who do not work. Astin (1993), however, reported that full-time or off-campus employment was negatively related to GPA, overall satisfaction with college, and completion of the bachelor's degree. Working full-time while being enrolled in college is one factor thought to reduce the likelihood of persisting to degree completion (Phillippe, Gonzalez, & Sullivan, 2005). Meanwhile, McCormick, Moore, and Kuh (2010) found that working either on campus or off campus is positively connected to several proportions of student engagement, particularly for full-time students. Specifically, students working more than 20 hours per week have the biggest gains on student engagement.

This debate may be particularly important for first-year students and especially first-generation college students. McCormick et al. (2010) found that first-year students were more likely to work longer hours and to work off campus more frequently than other students. Compared 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 (e.g., among freshmen, 20% of first-generation students versus 10% second- or older-generation students worked and among seniors, 39% of first-generation students versus 25% second- or older-generation). Furthermore, 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%). Moreover, Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, and Miller (2007) found that first-generation students had lower levels of campus involvement, peer interaction, and investment in learning, all of which can be further exacerbated by heavy student employment workloads. Similarly, Pike and Kuh (2005) found that first-generation students were more likely than their non-first generation counterparts to be academically or socially disengaged; hold more negative perceptions of the college environment and unlikely to integrate into their college experiences successfully. At the community college level, Levin, Montero, and Cerven (2010) examined working students and concluded that both positive and negative effects of engagement, or lack thereof, were dependent upon student characteristics (e.g., age, academic background, domestic status, financial status, native language, and physical condition).

Studies on student engagement indicate that academic and social activities in college have been a central theme in higher education research for some time (e.g., Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Within the college environment, student engagement is a reciprocal relationship between institutions and their students as they both contribute to possible opportunities of engagement. Campuses must determine the most appropriate balance for engagement opportunities (Kuh, 2009). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded from previous research that the impact of college is largely determined by a student's effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and out of class experiences on college campuses. They further expounded that students are not passive recipients of institutional efforts to "educate" or "change" them, but rather bear significant responsibility for any gains they derive from their college experience.

Though colleges may provide the environment conducive for engagement, financial need can limit student involvement on campus as students invest more time off campus to financially support themselves. This premise is an important one because 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 has increased by 38% within the past decade (Boehner & McKeon, 2003). According to information gathered by the College Board and the Census Bureau, the cost of a public four-year college education has increased by 202 percent since 1981, while the Consumer Price Index has increased only 80% (Boehner & McKeon, 2003).

This study explores whether working while enrolled in postsecondary education affects two aspects of persistence for first-generation students: *resiliency* and *institutional engagement*. *Resiliency* is

the ability to overcome obstacles by meeting challenges and finding alternative ways to accomplishment. These obstacles can include, but are not exclusive of: arenas of finance, lack of academic college preparation, administrative frustrations, and social situations as might occur in a dormitory (Miller, 2006. p.8).

And *institutional engagement* is the

informal and formal relationship with any of the following people or activities: faculty outside the classroom; other staff members (administrative and non-professional); clubs, campus activities, and recreational athletics; non-specified time spent on campus in the company of others (library, cafeteria, computer lab); and work-study and institutional employment, (Miller, 2006, p.9).

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 the college student. According to Smith (2006), working students may have to decide which role, whether as a student or employee, they would want to partake in a life context. Richardson (2002) proposed that everyone has the strength to seek self-actualization, knowledge, altruism, and congruence with a spiritual source of vigor. This force, according to Richardson (2002), 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 third, innate resilience, that is identifying the motivation for resiliency through personal characteristics and the drive for self-actualization (Galligan, Barnett, Brennan, & Israel, 2010). Furthermore, research has provided evidence that resiliency can be taught (Benard, 1993). Thus, 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 et al., 2010).

Methodology

In this study, differences between employment types and the resiliency and institutional engagement among low-income, first-generation college students was investigated. The dependent variable indicated whether a student participated in work-study, worked off campus, or was employed both in a work-study and off-campus job. An analysis of variance was used to ascertain mean differences. Data were obtained using the Miller's (2006) Family History Knowledge and College Persistence Survey, which is provided in the Appendix.

This study surveyed 60 low-income, first-generation college students participating in a Student Support Services (SSS) program at a private, four-year, not-for-profit, non-selective, tuition-driven college located on Long Island, NY. Eligibility for participation was subject to Federal TRIO low income guidelines provided in SSS legislation and regulations according to HEA. Of the 60 surveys distributed, 52 were completed representing an 86.7 % return rate. The subjects were traditional-aged college students who all had similar financial aid packages. For descriptive purposes, the gender composition was 35 females and 17 males. The ethnic composition was 19 Black, 24 Hispanic, 6 White, 1 Asian, and 2 students reported more than one ethnicity. Academically, 7 students had a GPA below a 2.0, 33 GPAs were between a 2.0-2.99, and 12 students were above a 3.0. Regarding class standing, there were 12 freshman, 15 sophomores, 17 juniors, and 8 seniors.

For purposes of this study, first-generation students are defined as students with neither parent earning a bachelor's degree. First-generation college status was determined through enrollment documents signed by students in the SSS program, and then verified by other indicators of first-generation status appearing in institutional student records. Income was determined through institutional records derived from student and parent information provided on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and participation in the federal TRIO program. 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 (2006) 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 survey instrument that defined engagement (reliability = 63%). The Crohnbach's Alpha values indicated no significant gain or loss in reliability percentage for any of the items in either variable (see Table 1).

Table 1: Subscales of the Family History Knowledge and College Persistence Study

Subscale	Item Numbers	Range of Scores
Resiliency	1, 3, 5, 11, 16, 28, 32, 34, 41, 47	10-50
Institutional Engagement	2, 6, 8, 10, 13, 23, 26, 30, 36, 38, 46	11-55

Results

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between employment type factor and resiliency and institutional engagement. In Table 2, the ANOVA applied to this data yielded statistically significant results for resiliency $F(2, 48) = 7.663, p = .001$, 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.

Additionally, a post-hoc test was conducted to evaluate pairwise differences among the means in resiliency using the Scheffé test. 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 employment. The results indicate greater resiliency among students employed off campus and those who worked both off campus and work-study than among 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 3.

Discussion

The study examined the relationship between forms of work and resilience and institutional engagement among low-income, first-generation college students. Findings from the analysis indicated a significant relationship for resiliency and employment type. Interestingly, students who had only on-campus, work-study jobs (compared to off-campus or off-campus/work-study employment) reported significantly lower levels of resilience. This suggests that students who do not work on campus (or on campus alone) are able to “bounce back” and navigate challenges while attending college. Because low-income, first-generation college students are less likely to have parental financial support, it is important for them to maintain either on-campus or off-campus employment.

Table 2: Relationship Between Employment Type and Engagement and Resiliency

		<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Engagement 11 items	Between Groups	83.07	2	41.53	1.53	.23
	Within Groups	1109.36	41	27.06		
	Total	11.92.43	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			

Table 3: Resiliency Averages for Three Employment Types

Employment Type	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	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

Note: 95% Confident intervals of pairwise differences.

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 our data, we concluded that the participants were somewhat engaged with the institution. Prior research has shown that first-generation students had lower levels of campus involvement, peer interaction, and investment in learning due to heavy student employment workloads (Lundberg et al., 2007).

The post-hoc test concluded that students who engaged in off-campus employment exhibited more resiliency than 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 may be able to overcome obstacles because they are able to see the “bigger picture” of graduation.

Pike, Kuh and Massa-McKinley (2008) found that there was a negative relationship with students working more than 20 hours a week while

enrolled in college. Yet, with the rise in college costs, it has become the norm for students to work and attend college. In Pike et al. (2008), 68% of all college students worked during the academic year, and one-third of these students worked more than 20 hours per week. “Despite the fact that many in higher education believe that working for pay hinders student success, research has failed to find a consistent relationship between work and grades” (Pike et al., 2008, p.561). Thus, it is possible to conclude that the relationship between work and grades is mediated by intervening college experiences.

Limitations and Conclusion

This study is not without limitations. The outcomes apply to only undergraduate students participating in the SSS program at a non-selective, tuition driven, four-year, and private institution on Long Island, NY. Additionally, the subjects themselves signified an additional limitation as they participated in the SSS program. The very nature of this involvement reveals interest in seeking support that garners and fosters institutional engagement by developing stronger relationships with college personnel.

The data suggests that students who work either on or off campus have a slight positive relationship with several dimensions of student engagement (McCormick et al. 2010). In other words, low-income, first-generation student engagement levels are slightly higher, though not as high as resiliency, when they also have to balance work obligations; as it is important for them to be successful students and also be able to support themselves financially. Due to tuition increases at public four-year colleges coupled with the need for assistance in covering their educational expenses, it is valuable for low-income, first-generation students to get a job and maintain that source of income while attending college (Boehner & McKeon, 2003).

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

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Appendix

FAMILY HISTORY KNOWLEDGE AND COLLEGE PERSISTENCE SURVEY

Survey No. _____

Please circle the answer that best fits *your* information about college.

A. When I started college, my intent was

1. To see what college is like but not necessarily complete a degree
 2. To achieve a bachelor's degree
 3. To achieve a master's degree
 4. To achieve a doctorate degree
 5. Other
-

B. My current educational intent is

1. To see what college is like but not necessarily complete a degree
 2. To achieve a bachelor's degree
 3. To achieve a master's degree
 4. To achieve a doctorate degree
 5. Other
-

C. Regarding college, I expect to

1. Drop out temporarily
 2. Transfer before graduating
 3. Graduate from _____ College
 4. Other
-

D. My employment during college has been

1. Work-study
2. Off campus employment
3. Both
4. Neither

E. My place of residence during college has been

1. Dorm
 2. Home (off campus residence)
 3. Dorm and home (or off campus residence)
 4. Other; please explain
-

F. Please circle *all* the items indicating the way you interact with others at _____ College.

1. faculty outside of class
2. administrative and staff personnel
3. clubs
4. campus activities
5. recreational athletics
6. "hanging out" in the cafeteria
7. "hanging out" in the computer lab
8. studying in the library

Please complete these questions supplying information about your family.

G. How many of your grandparents have you known? _____

H. How many of your great grandparents have you known? _____

I. My family's ethnic heritage is (Please list all): _____

J. The religion in which I was raised is _____

K. In my home **now**, I live with (use other side of page if needed):

Name	Relationship

Please circle the number that best applies to each statement.

Strongly Disagree (SD = 1)

Disagree (D = 2)

Unsure (U = 3)

Agree (A = 4)

Strongly Agree (SA = 5)

	SD	D	U	A	SA
1 I try harder if a task is very difficult.	1	2	3	4	5
2 I like being involved in activities at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
3 I want to graduate from the college I am currently attending.	1	2	3	4	5
4 My parent(s) persist in goals they set.	1	2	3	4	5
5 I can usually overcome obstacles.	1	2	3	4	5
6 I have attended club meetings at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
7 Family members treat me differently because I am a college student.	1	2	3	4	5
8 I prefer work-study to off campus employment.	1	2	3	4	5
9 I am confident I have made the right decision in choosing to attend _____.	1	2	3	4	5
10 I am involved in student government at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
11 I like to try new things.	1	2	3	4	5
12 My education at _____ will help secure future employment.	1	2	3	4	5
13 I like to spend time in the cafeteria.	1	2	3	4	5
14 I would appeal to a committee if I had a problem at my college.	1	2	3	4	5

15	My grandparents persist in goals they set.	1	2	3	4	5
16	I am the one in control of my life.	1	2	3	4	5
17	Ideas I learn from my family have determined my personality.	1	2	3	4	5
18	I have changed my religious ideas since becoming a college student.	1	2	3	4	5
19	My parents tell me stories about my grandparents or great grandparents.	1	2	3	4	5
20	It is very important for me to graduate from _____ as opposed from some other school.	1	2	3	4	5
21	My grandparents or great grandparents tell me stories about our family history.	1	2	3	4	5
22	I have changed my image since being a college student.	1	2	3	4	5
23	I talk to my professors outside of class.	1	2	3	4	5
24	I am ashamed when others see me with my parents in public places.	1	2	3	4	5
25	I enjoy the stories my grandparents or great grandparents tell me.	1	2	3	4	5
26	I participate in extracurricular activities in college.	1	2	3	4	5
27	I am inspired by the achievements of my ancestors.	1	2	3	4	5
28	I have learned to overcome obstacles from my relative's stories.	1	2	3	4	5
29	I will stay at my college even if it does not offer the exact major I want.	1	2	3	4	5
30	I like working off campus better than on-campus.	1	2	3	4	5
31	My parents or siblings make fun of the words I use.	1	2	3	4	5
32	I ask for help when I need it.	1	2	3	4	5
33	Courses I take in school make me think of new ideas.	1	2	3	4	5
34	I would find a way to pay expenses in order to stay at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
35	Views I have learned at college are negatively affecting my relationship with my family.	1	2	3	4	5
36	I like talking to various people who work at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
37	I feel I belong at [name of institution].	1	2	3	4	5
38	I attend student events at my college.	1	2	3	4	5
39	I can recognize themes and patterns through generations of my family.	1	2	3	4	5
40	If I needed to stop attending school, I would eventually return to my college.	1	2	3	4	5
41	I am proud of my ability to juggle home, work, and school schedules.	1	2	3	4	5
42	Immediate family members have accepted changes in me since attending college.	1	2	3	4	5
43	I put my family's needs before my education.	1	2	3	4	5
44	My college can give me the education I want.	1	2	3	4	5
45	I have changed my political views since becoming a college student.	1	2	3	4	5
46	I have role models in college.	1	2	3	4	5
47	I am determined to reach my goals.	1	2	3	4	5
48	I focus on my future.	1	2	3	4	5
49	I have learned about participating in activities from family stories.	1	2	3	4	5
50	My close friends rate _____ as a quality institution.	1	2	3	4	5