

Anderson, Jane. Annotation of “An Exploration of the Experiences of First-Generation College Students in Lasallian Higher Education.” by Kurt Schackmuth, Ph.D. diss., Loyola University, Chicago, 2012. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education* 4, no. 3 (Institute for Lasallian Studies at Saint Mary’s University of Minnesota: 2013).

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ANNOTATION

Schackmuth, Kurt. “An Exploration of the Experiences of First-Generation College Students in Lasallian Higher Education.” Ph.D. dissertation, Loyola University, Chicago, 2012, 197 pp.

Justification for this phenomenological study of 13 first-generation students in a Lasallian college springs from the fact that, while first-generation students are twice as likely to drop out of college as students whose parents attended college, there is a paucity of in-depth qualitative research to guide retention efforts (2). The author asserts that even less is known about the role of faith-based education in retention of first-generation students (6), which informs the primary questions of this study: 1) What experiences specific to Lasallian education do first-generation students suggest enhance—as well as detract—from their learning and involvement on campus? 2) If experiences differ, how might they best be explained (6)?

Quantitative studies on first-generation student characteristics identify inadequate academic preparation (13), high stress coupled with less likelihood of accessing campus support sources (17), less engagement in campus activities, and conflicts between the culture of home and college environments (22). Variables predictive of persistence to graduation include ACT/SAT scores, high school GPA, and non-cognitive variables such as having long-term goals, self-regulated learning skills (23), and ability to understand and cope with racism (27).

Support strategies employed by colleges and universities include summer bridge programs (39-41), freshman seminars (42-43), learning communities (44-47), and peer mentoring (48-49). The author concludes that research primarily supports the role of mentoring and learning communities in retention of students (47,49). However, a negative aspect of learning communities that is noted may be the tendency for “group-think” and for continuation of high school modes of socializing and behaving (47-48).

A synthesis of the few existing studies in faith-based institutions indicates that those who persist are more likely to attend religious services, live on campus, engage with faculty, join a fraternity or sorority, and report a spiritual “fit” with their campus (52-55). The author notes that there are no published studies of the way that specific religious groups have used their unique charisms or educational philosophies to inform their policies and programs for students whose parents have had no personal experience with post-secondary education (55).

The author conducted this phenomenological study of first-generation students in a pseudonymous “Lasallian College” via semi-structured interviews that included photo elicitation (talking about photos the students had taken to highlight their dorm room, a favorite instructor, a place where they usually study, and all the items they carry each day). Interview questions probed pre-college experiences, sense of accomplishments, challenges, and sources of strength. In addition, questions about the religious nature of their college and what it means to be

“Lasallian” were used to provide insight into the role of faith-based education for first-generation students (59-61).

One of the predominant themes that emerged from this study was the role of college professors, the small classes, and the perception that the professor truly cared about them. The students related many instances of personal contact and work with instructors, and often the definition of Lasallian was tied to these professors and their actions on behalf of the respondents’ personal and academic success (134-136).

A theme of academic rigor and engagement emerged as a result of the students’ participation in freshman year Seminar Program, which featured Socratic discussions that forced students to read, discuss, and think deeply about issues of social justice such as America’s correctional system or border control (137-139). They also often cited a January term which offered travel study or on-campus accelerated courses, often involving volunteering (139-140).

Participation in volunteer work was another major theme. These students were active in tutoring younger children, campus ministry activities, or Habitat for Humanity projects. They projected a sense of needing to give back, and felt that their connection to campus life was stronger because they engaged in volunteer activities at this college whose motto was “Enter to learn, leave to serve.” (148-152).

When asked to define what being Lasallian meant, students often referenced visual symbolism (prominence of the chapel and statue of Saint John Baptist de La Salle, crucifixes in the classroom), the example of professors who went “above and beyond” as examples of Lasallian charism, and the college’s mission-based call to action (148).

While many of this study’s findings confirmed extant literature on first-generation college students—e.g., feeling underprepared for college academics and stressors such as parental expectations, finances, academics, and lack of confidence (158-160)—some findings challenged the prevailing literature. Notably, these students received considerable encouragement from their parents, were involved in co-curricular activities, had friends, and sought help when needed (160-163). The author suggests that the unique aspects of Lasallian College may have mitigated traditional obstacles to college success for first-generation students (163).

Implications include the importance of mentoring new faculty and staff on the role of the Lasallian charism in student success (164), providing curricular initiatives such as service learning, undergraduate research, and domestic and foreign travel studies (165), emphasizing physical representations of mission and core values (167), and partnering with high schools to enhance college preparedness in study strategies, deep comprehension, and stress management (167).

The author concludes with a call for collaborative research on the unique faith-based aspects of Lasallian colleges that support first-generation students (170). This is an excellent suggestion, and the work that he has done to develop interview and photo elicitation protocols provide an excellent roadmap for replication by other institutions within the Lasallian family. This dissertation provides important insights on the role of the Lasallian charism in success for first-

generation students. Replication by other Lasallian institutions would enhance efforts to provide a Christian and human education to students who are this generation's "children of the artisans and poor," De La Salle's inspiration for founding the Brothers of the Christian schools in seventeenth-century France.