



## **A Comparative Discussion of First-Generation College Students in the USA with Preparatory Year Students in the Saudi Arabia with an emphasis on eLearning**

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### **Abstract**

*The extension of the theory, Cultural and Social Capital, suggests that first-generation college students (in the United States these students are defined as those whose parents lack a college education themselves) are less prepared academically, socially and culturally to attend college. Their parents are not prepared to guide their children through the process of choosing a college, applying for college nor prepare them for a corresponding career. The researchers suggest that this phenomenon may not be unique to the United States and that it is representative in other potential countries as well. Developed and developing programs have much to share with each other as they attempt to best prepare students across cultures and across curriculums who arrive at colleges and universities with less cultural capital and are thusly less prepared than their peers. The ensuing discussion explores some pivotal points where the Student Support Services program common in the United States of America and the Preparatory Year Program instituted in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia may share some approaches in common, may mark some distinct differences and may benefit from a greater knowledge of different approaches to acculturating students successfully into the overall college environment, especially the eLearning climate. The discussion is followed by a call for more exploratory research and comparative analysis to determine more areas ripe for global cooperation for the future of education across cultural boundaries.*

### **Introduction**

If one were to believe that technological advances are all good and efficient methods for learning in today's college culture as much as the advertising around the world would have you believe, then one is to believe that on-line learning is in essence the efficient answer to life's question of instant education. When a degree is only as far away as the nearest internet café or one's own home computer and internet access, then education becomes more available to everyone regardless of geography. In many ways this accessibility becomes a great equalizer; however, it is important to ask the question and explore the population trends of those that are currently attending colleges and universities within today's global economic realities. The authors raised the question previously about whether or not awe-inspiring technological advances were at the expense of actual learning (Al Raddadi, A. & Searcy, M.A., 2010). This instalment represents the continued discussion with respect to online, eLearning and a cultural variety of students. Is eLearning effective for those students classified as first-generation students and what are the best practices for acculturating these students into ethically accountable and academically responsible learners? This discussion will focus on describing and explaining the first-generation student, discuss the social and capital perspective and then discuss some of the practices incorporated in the United States as well as within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as to how such students are acculturated into the college environment and provided the tools to allow them to navigate through potential deficits in their elementary and secondary educations to succeed on through gaining a college degree and ultimately become contributory members of society.



## Definition of the First-Generation Student

The term first-generation student is associated with the student whose parents neither attended college nor otherwise earned a college degree. Normal societal and cultural standards often dictate that the likelihood of a student enrolling into college at the postsecondary level is strongly correlated to their parents' level of education even when other extraneous factors are taken into account (Choy, 2001). As such, students whose parents attended college, will have a greater likelihood of attending college themselves; whereas, students whose parents did not attend college often are statistically at a disadvantage with respect to obtaining a college education. Statistics such as these have been reported in numerous arenas (Tym, C.; McMillion, R.; Barone, S. & Webster, J. 2004) and yet with the economic global realities of this century, the trends appear to be changing. Students who come from low-income or otherwise disadvantaged circumstances appear to be attending college in greater numbers with many of them targeting the earning of advanced degrees (Farrell, E. 2007).

First-generation students are likely to enter college with less than adequate preparation for both the academic and cultural environment as they will have less social networking experience and knowledge about what to expect from relatives or from first-hand experience (Thayer, 2000). The parents of these students are less likely to be prepared to offer the support and assistance required to guide their children through the processes associated with college entry or college discipline and success.

## Social and Capital Perspective

As first-generation students have increasingly been the subject of a growing body of research (Pascarella, E. T. Pierson, C.T. Wolniak, G.C. & Terenzini, P.T. 2004), the Social and Capital Perspective (Coleman, J. 1988) has come to the forefront as a lens which aids our focus and understanding of this particular population of ever-increasing students. The terms "social" and "cultural" here are of paramount importance for the population. First-generation students must learn to acculturate into the college environment where they have had little to zero actual knowledge preparation, even if they indeed had the parental support (Schmidt, 2003). Cultural capital exists when such knowledge of the dominant culture and the ability to navigate within this culture with ease exists (Pascarella, E. T. et. al.) First-generation students lack the background support to obtain this knowledge and as such, lack the rudimentary entry procedural knowledge with respect to admissions, financing college, if living within a culture where this is of concern, selection of a course of study, or scheduling the proper classes. Once enrolled within those classes, the task often becomes even more daunting as these students struggle with the discipline of study, the understanding of which issues are vitally important to dedicate attention and which issues within the environment may not be as vital to success. Consequently, time and energy are wasted on tasks that are often of little importance to the first-generation student's success and less than adequate time is spent on securing the success of tasks that matter most to the student's ability to survive and thrive within the post-secondary academic culture.

Social capital exists and resides within people who have developed the ability within the culture to navigate social relationships which are beneficial to the individual within the environment where resources are not only available but accessible (Pascarella, E. T. et. al.). It is inadequate for students to be within the academic environment where programs are available for them and where they are not able to gather the information adequately within an appropriate amount of time in order to access the benefits of the program to contribute to their own success. Often this process relies on the ability of the student to form sustaining successful relationships (in any cultural environment) where the ability to obtain such resources is made available and open to them. The social and cultural perspective as a lens to understanding, allows us to recognize and provide credence to the idea that those who are less capitalized with social networks of people with knowledge of the college environment at home are potentially at a significant disadvantage with respect to their peers within the college environment.

In an effort to begin an international discussion on best practices with respect to acculturating students within the culture of the college environment, the authors will describe the basic framework for programs within their home countries and then discuss the ramifications of eLearning on these structures.



## **Student Support Services (TRIO) within the United States**

In the United States, the Council for the Opportunity in Education defines the TRIO program as a “set of federally-funded college opportunity programs that motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds in their pursuit of a college degree” ([www.Coenet.us](http://www.Coenet.us)). Colleges within the U.S. have interpreted this in relatively uniform ways; MIT suggests that “the mission of student support services (S3) is to promote the academic success and holistic experience of students...” ([web.mit.edu](http://web.mit.edu)); whereas, West Virginia University suggests that the program was instituted to “assist students overcome class, social, academic, and cultural barriers to higher education” ([sss.wvu.edu](http://sss.wvu.edu)). Actual obligations and duties within the program are often spelled out in detail for such programs in an attempt to compensate for the lack of social and cultural perspective from where the students begin their career. For example, Somerset Community College’s program (Kentucky, USA) specifically directs the students with clear obligations. The students “must agree to follow advice from the SSS staff” (suggesting a strategic beginning to the social network deficiency discussed above) “to attend classes regularly, to receive free tutoring in subjects where [they] have a need, and to take part in activities such as study groups” ([www.somerset.kctcs.edu](http://www.somerset.kctcs.edu)). Taken from the Social and Cultural Capital perspective, the Student Support Services programs throughout the United States are designed to provide clear structured orientations to the culture of postsecondary education. Workshops and orientations are regular and commonplace. Tutoring is provided often free of monetary obligations and courses at the developmental (often referred to as transitional) are part of the curriculum to address the deficiencies of primary and secondary education and the students own clear lacking in essential areas such as mathematics, English and reading. First-generation students often do not progress as quickly as their peers as they often must take some of these developmental courses prior to enrolling in regular college coursework. Also, many hours over the course of the semester are spent in workshops and tutoring to develop strategic relationships with essential personnel made available to assist them with access to resources within the college environment. These hours, although not always logged and recorded, often significantly add up to an increase over and above those hours spent by their peers who are more prepared for college with the aid of their parents. This often translates to longer periods of time to earn their postsecondary degree.

## **Preparatory Program within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The preparatory program is a relatively new response to dealing with the first-generation college student within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The preparatory year is designed to provide a rigorous schedule for students who come from high school and take a specific year of study to ready themselves for the undergraduate rigor of the college curriculum to come. Students spend a set number of hours a day focusing on mastering the basics: English, math, science and university skills such as studying and test taking. Whereas the student support services allow students the freedom to approach their classes on an as needed basis, students within the preparatory year program usually have little choice in their participation and their scheduling options. The rigor and discipline is provided at a more intense pace with the expectations of sure-footed advancement.

## **E-Learning Culture**

As part of the “best practices” discussion, within the KSA, the communication is highlighted and emphasized as very important between the family and their students using Learning Management System (LMS) tools anywhere and anytime. Thusly, the parents are able to connect with their son/daughter learner by tracing his/her level in preparatory program. The student may get encouragement from his/her family whilst in the study environment.

## **E-Learning Technology**

Depending on the geography, access to technology is variable, yet from the remote desert towns within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the rural farming communities in the United States, the internet is prevalent and many of students have grown up with the computer and the World Wide Web as a



close friend and welcome companion. Although familiar with the concept of using the internet for social networking and information gathering, it has yet to become very clear that the internet is the most advantageous tool for education with respect to the first-generation student. For example, once enrolled within the Student Support Services program at a college within the United States, students are often asked to prove their dedication to their own academic success prior to being allowed to take eLearning courses. This success may be defined as a thorough understanding of plagiarism and source citation and what constitutes academic integrity with respect to one's own work submission or the success may be defined simply as the demonstration of proficiency in computer usage. The authors view this work as a call to share best practices within the international community to better understand the convergence of first-generation college students and the integration of eLearning. Feedback is welcome and would be included in future instalments.

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