First in My Family: Student Loan Debt and Personal Happiness Among First-Generation Students at Illinois

PURPOSE

This study examines the way that first-generation students understand the impact of their anticipated student-loan debt on their personal happiness, academic and personal, as students at the University of Illinois. This study is particularly important at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign because 23% of the incoming freshman class of 2013 has identified themselves as first-generation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to you to be a first-generation college student - to be a student whose parents have not received a postsecondary education or degree?
2. What are some of the unique challenges you have faced as a first-generation college student?
3. What are some of the personal financial challenges you have faced as a student?
4. Thinking specifically about the student-loan debt total you anticipate having upon graduation, how does that debt affect your personal happiness today?

METHODS

Six interviews with first-generation students over the age of 18. Each interview ran approximately 30-45 minutes. Four female students and two male students participated in the study.

SCALE: 1 (Unhappy) – 10 (Happy)

FINDINGS + FUTURE RESEARCH

- Areas of Student Life MOST Impacted by Student Debt; < 7
  - Relationships with Friends and Significant Others, Personal Health, Career Outlook and Sleep.

LIMITATIONS

1. The graphed values include only the responses of those students who chose a numeric value. The scale must be retuned for future studies to capture a wider range of responses.
2. Revise the life categories to reflect the concerns voiced by the interviewed students.

EOL 570: Organization of Higher Education

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Thinking about debt while I take classes, lingering debt, once I graduate affects everything [...] added pressure and stress, even if its not due now it is going to be due later.”

“My sleep is horrible. I probably sleep only 5 hours a night, on a good night I might get 7 hours, I have to sleep when I can.”

“I think that I have met a lot of people who have everything handed to them but complain so much about working 6 hours a week. They don’t know what it means to really struggle.”

“Nightmares, cold sweats, anxious, heart racing. [...] Summer months are terrible - I do not get paid, needed to take a private loan to pay off rent.”

“Thinking about debt while I take classes, lingering debt, once I graduate affects everything [...] added pressure and stress, even if its not due now it is going to be due later.”