VU Kick Start: A pilot intervention for first-in-family university students

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Abstract

Vu Kick Start is a program for first-in-family (FIF) university students including individuals whose parents have no history of attending university. Many FIF students struggle with the transition to university, as they lack the social capital benefits other students have. A sense of belonging at university can also be slow to develop, as well as poor self-efficacy. FIF students are also less likely to develop supportive connections to university staff and peers. These factors contribute to poorer academic outcomes and leaving university early. To date no Australian universities provide an on-campus intervention for FIF students. A program before classes commence to kick start the academic experience and to develop social capital will meet an important need and will be one way that the uni can facilitate the transition to university improve retention and academic success.

Introduction

The problem: starting University with a disadvantage

 As a group, these students are more vulnerable: they report less knowledge about university, lower family support, more likely to struggle with the transition from high school, more likely to leave university, less likely to stay on track to graduate, and less likely to graduate, (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004) and they are also more stressed, detached, and dislocated (Stephens et al, 2012). Compared to other students, FIF students lack social capital, which is the concrete information, social support, network connections, and the access resources from those connections, which is crucial for all students (Bourdieu, 1986). Non-FIF students benefit from the advantage of the knowledge and support from their university-educated parents, which is related to greater confidence in navigating the complex world of university. FIF students face an uneven playing field, and universities must do what they can to "help distribute more evenly the spoils of higher education and disrupt the patterns of inherited advantage, which increasingly divide society" (Parker, 2016).

Self-efficacy

Outcomes at university have less to do with grades, but complex and idiosyncratic psychosocial factors, including self-efficacy, that are often not taken into consideration when exploring the outcomes of students based on parental educational background (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Prior studies have indicated that FIF students experience a greater degree of perceived stress as a result of fearing academic failure which has been shown to influence students' self-efficacy (Janke, Rudert, Marksteiner, & Dickhauser, 2017; Nichols & Islas, 2016). For example, a FIF student commented that she felt like an "imposter" in the university environment (O'Shea, 2015). Low sense of entitlement at university has been found to negatively impact the psychological well-being, and motivation, of FIF students that have struggled to imagine a long-term outcome, or goal (Padgett, Johnson, & Pascarella, 2012}. This has been highlighted throughout qualitative studies where students profess they just want to "pass" and survive another term (O'Shea, 2015).

Belonging at university

Whether an individual feels they belong to their environment has been shown to influence self-confidence, psychological well-being, and social isolation Anecdotal and clinical studies have lent support to Bourdieu's theory of cultural differences affecting how FIF students identify with the university environment. Students that did not feel connected reported significant levels of dislocation from university culture and community (Luzeckyj, McCann, Graham, King, & McCann, 2017; O'Shea, 2015; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). There is evidence that sense of belonging has implications on both retention and engagement and is considered an important variable to be considered in measuring student outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2007). These complex feelings of dislodgement and lack of connection have emerged in a number of studies where FIF students describe themselves as "a fish out of water" as "aliens" and "social misfits." These subjective feelings have links with increased dissatisfaction with their chosen course (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Janke et al., 2017), less engagement with peers and staff (Hérbert, 2018), and less time spent on campus (Palbusa & Gauvain, 2017). These factors were found to be negatively correlated with grades (Ishitani, 2006; Janke et al., 2017; Pascarella et al., 2004).

For others, attending university was seen in opposition to family expectations and class membership, which caused some level of confusion within the family (Raey et al., 2009). In an interview one student poignantly described the personal emotional cost of going to university that altered their self-identity, this caused feelings of loss and anguish as they struggled to find commonality from where they came from (Hébert, 2018). In another anecdotal transcript one FIF student explains, "I'm still trying to figure out who I am" (Carpenter & Peña, 2017).

Social support

FIF students also fall short in developing other forms of support: they are less likely to engage with uni staff during class, after class, and by email, and they are also less likely to access student support services or to seek help from academic staff or peers (Garriott & Nisle, 2017; Scevak et al. 2015; Schwartz et al., 2018). The authors also found that FIF students reported a higher degree of isolation, and were less likely to report that they received help from family or friends (Scevak et al. 2015). Soria and Stebleton (2012) explored the degree to which FIF students interacted with faculty compared to their peers. Students that were FIF, reported significantly less interactions with faculty and engaged significantly less in class discussions. The authors surmised, "when students are not as engaged in college, their overall experience can be isolating and disconnecting" (p. 675). In an Australian study that narrated FIF students' personal experiences, students have spoken about the difficulty of approaching staff members, admitting that they felt both scared, and intimidated, preferring to turn to other students for help (O'Shea, 2015).

Proposed program: Rationale

VU Kick Start is intended to impact the successful transition to university, higher academic achievement and improve retention of FIF students. The program will commence in semester 1 2019 with a pilot intervention for 50 first-year FIF university students. VU Kick Start aims to 1) improve students' confidence in their study skills and 2) positively impact the development of social capital, that is, empowering students to actively create their own formal and informal support networks at university. This will positively impact their academic engagement, belonging at university, achievement (grades), and retention (see Figure 1).

Program Objective: An intervention for first-year FIF university students to develop social capital related to positive academic outcomes.					
Inputs	**Outputs: Activities**	**Outputs: Participation**	**Short-term outcomes** 1 week	**Medium-term outcomes** 4-8 months	**Long-term outcomes** 3-4 years
Experienced lecturers Support from university First Year College Research evidence about FIF students Pilot research data	6-hour intervention program before semester begins On-going social support Evaluation throughout the 2018 Publish and present research	50 FIF students in program group (50 in control group) Research assistants and lecturers to facilitate intervention Honour's students participate in research	Developed social capital: Uni support and social support Self-efficacy Belonging Engagement	Complete semester 1; complete first year (retention) Semester 1 and 2 grades Sustained self-efficacy, belonging, engagement Publish and present research	Timely progress toward completion Complete university degree

Figure 1: VU Kick Start Program Logic

VU Kick Start is based on evidence from previous programs. Schwartz and colleagues (2018) developed and delivered a summer program focused on strategies to enhance social capital, including how to access support on campus, strategies to deal with challenges, and role-playing interactions with teaching faculty. At the end of the academic year, the program participants had better academic results, felt more positively about seeking help, and reported much stronger connections and networks at university. There is evidence that sense of belonging has implications on both persistence and engagement and coping and is considered an important variable to be considered in measuring student outcomes (Hale, Hannum, & Espelage, 2005). FIF students who are more engaged in with peers and faculty, demonstrate greater autonomy over their own sense of achievement, and have significantly better academic outcomes in their second and third year at university (Pascarella et al., 2004).

The program will give students the skills, connections, and confidence before they even begin classes, as well as provide information about building their own networks – to give them a kick start – rather than to hand-hold and provide them with supports. Participants will attend three 2-hour workshops in the week before university classes begin. The workshops will have three areas of focus:

1. Provide information about the importance of networking at university, including available support resources on campus in order to develop the students' confidence and self-efficacy to utilise such support.
2. Provide opportunities for students to connect with each other to foster peer social network which also contributes to developing a sense of belonging.
3. Provide practical skills (memory enhancing, speed reading, etc.) to increase students' confidence and competence.

Evaluation

Participants in the intervention will complete surveys at four time points throughout the academic year and the results will be compared to a control group (that does not complete the intervention). Participants will report on their understanding of university resources and

academic skills, self-efficacy, engagement, belonging, grades, and retention. This data will be analysed using statistical methods. Participants in the intervention will also be invited to complete an interview or participate in a focus group to talk about their experiences as a FIF student and their experiences with the intervention. This information will be analysed qualitatively and the results will be incorporated with the survey data.

Audience Discussion

1. If you were a FIF university student, did you feel different? Did it take some time to adjust and what helped the most?
2. Presently we don't plan to have on-going support to program participants because the program is designed to provide students with skills and confidence to build their own networks. But some students might benefit from extra formal support throughout the academic year. What form might that take, while still encouraging the students to develop their own social capital?
3. At Victoria University the most common reason for students (all students, not just FIF) to cease studying is for "employment" which might mean a promotion, a new job, or perhaps financial issues. This is an external factor we can't control, but how can our program prepare students for employment issues?

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