

# **First-Generation College Students With Disabilities: The Impact of Relationships With Institutional Agents on Their Journey**

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*Students with disabilities who are attending college are less likely to enroll in a four-year postsecondary program. Once enrolled, students with disabilities are also more likely to drop out of college and not complete their degree than their peers without disabilities. This qualitative study used in-depth interviews with ten first-generation college students with disabilities to discover if they had relationships with institutional agents that helped put them on the path to a four-year college. The results of this study suggest that first-generation students with disabilities can benefit from relationships with institutional agents.*

*Keywords: first-generation college students, students with disabilities, institutional agents, pivotal moments*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Students with disabilities who complete a college certificate or degree have favorable financial and social outcomes (Newman et al., 2011)—according to the results of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, a database of post-school outcomes for students with disabilities, students with disabilities who completed a postsecondary degree or certificate had higher employment rates and hourly wages or salaries than their less-educated peers. They were more likely to live independently and have a driver’s license and a savings account. Students with disabilities who complete a postsecondary degree are also more likely to spend time with friends and participate in their community via volunteerism than their peers with less educational attainment (Newman et al., 2011). As the NLTS-2 data show, the positive outcomes from earning a postsecondary degree or certificate are not limited to education or earnings. Students with disabilities who earn degrees also become more socially involved with friends and their community.

Students with disabilities have the same postsecondary educational and career desires as their non-disabled peers (Wagner et al., 2007). Despite increasing graduation and college enrollment, students with disabilities are less likely to enroll in a four-year postsecondary program or complete their degree (Newman et al., 2011).

### **First-Generation College Students**

First-generation college students face many barriers. For this article, first-generation college students can be defined as students whose parents did not attend college and, therefore, did not complete a college degree. Because their parents did not attend college, first-generation college students have less college knowledge than their peers with college-educated parents. Therefore, first-generation college students need more understanding of the admissions, college selection, and financial aid processes (Choi, 2001; Engle,

2007; Espinoza, 2011; Thayer, 2000). Lack of college knowledge is not the only barrier for first-generation college students; many first-generation college students experience challenges with respect to being from lower socioeconomic households and coming from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Choi, 2001; Engle, 2007; Redford & Hoyer, 2018). Finally, many first-generation college students struggle academically (Choi, 2001; Engle, 2007; Redford & Hoyer, 2018). After experiencing struggle and failure, many first-generation college students incorrectly believe they are not “college material” and drop out (Engle, 2007; Espinoza, 2011).

### **College Students With Disabilities**

First-generation college students with disabilities experience all the same barriers as their first-generation non-disabled peers, plus they have unique needs that coincide with having a disability. Students with disabilities may have trouble meeting the academic standards needed for success in college. They may also experience transition planning obstacles and problems obtaining much-needed help-seeking skills. The Individuals with Disabilities Act mandates transition planning (IDEA; 2004). Students with disabilities must understand the accommodations and services that help them succeed and advocate for themselves to acquire accommodations in postsecondary settings (Scruggs et al., 2013; Thurlow & Quenenmoen, 2012). They also need to develop self-advocacy and help-seeking skills to persist in college. Help-seeking skills develop when individuals receive enough emotional support to feel confident in making decisions and safe in asking for help (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Students who develop help-seeking behaviors have the confidence and ability to ask for help to achieve academic success. Espinoza (2011) defined help-seeking behaviors as seeking educational assistance when needed. The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) ensures support and services for students with disabilities in K-12 educational settings but ends upon graduation. Once students with disabilities are in college, they must self-identify and self-advocate to receive support and services. Self-advocacy and help-seeking behaviors could contribute to students with disabilities in college success (Madaus et al., 2011; Zheng et al., 2012; Larose & Roy, 1991).

### **Institutional Agents**

First-generation students who have transitioned from high school to college emphasized that the relationships and trust they developed with staff allowed them to be receptive to the support that helped them get into and through college (Engle, 2007). Institutional agents have a positive effect on the student’s trajectory. This study defines institutional agents as college-educated agents of the educational institution (i.e., teachers, counselors, educational assistants, and administration). “The single greatest factor in overcoming the odds is a caring and compassionate person who takes a special interest in the students and makes extra efforts to help” (Johnson, 1997, p. 44). Brinckerhoff (1996) and Cowan (2006) identified how teachers, counselors, and school psychologists play an essential role in the transition process. They agree that institutional agents have a wealth of knowledge that is key to postsecondary success for students with disabilities.

### **Pivotal Moments**

The theoretical framework for this study is the pivotal moment’s theory. The three main components of pivotal moments are 1) trusting relationships, 2) mentoring and advocacy, and 3) transmission of knowledge.

#### *Trusting Relationships*

Building a trusting relationship is the first component and foundation for creating a pivotal moment (Espinoza, 2011). First-generation college students must know that institutional agents care about them and want to help them succeed because they spend less time talking with teachers or counselors about their educational aspirations than their peers with college-educated parents (Espinoza, 2011). Students can form relationships with institutional agents through regular classroom interaction, extracurricular activities, or any other related activity in which students interact with institutional agents (Espinoza, 2011). Effective relationships require trust, mutual respect, and obligation. Students are more open to meeting high

expectations and taking in knowledge transmitted to them from the institutional agent once trust is established (Espinoza, 2011).

### *Mentoring and Advocacy*

Institutional agents who provide pivotal moments do not just relay information; they advise students and advocate for them. Espinoza (2011) states that a critical outcome of pivotal moments is transforming a student's psychological disposition toward school. In other words, students strengthen their abilities to envision a new possible self (college graduate), become effective goal-setters, and adopt help-seeking behavior (Espinoza, 2011). Institutional agents can become advocates for their students by being intentional and systematic in their approach. Mentoring and advocacy will lead to a pivotal moment with the deliberate transmission of college knowledge and academics. Many students may experience a close relationship with an institutional agent, but it does not alter their academic trajectory because no college knowledge or academic skills were transmitted (Espinoza, 2011). This type of relationship is what Stanton-Salazar (2001) calls "fool's gold." It may seem supportive to the student but does not impart necessary academic or institutional knowledge.

### *Transmitting Academic Knowledge*

The most critical part of the pivotal moment theory is the transmission of knowledge (Espinoza, 2011). This part of the intervention is when students learn the necessary steps to get into college and the resources available and begin creating a network and a database of support systems to help them succeed. Students learn to set goals, seek help, and appreciate extrinsic rewards. They also begin creating a new self-image of being college material (Espinoza, 2011). With the transmission of knowledge, the pivotal moment is complete.

### *Early Versus Late Pivotal Moments*

Pivotal moments have a tremendous impact, whether early or late in a student's academic career (Espinoza, 2011). Early or late pivotal moments can have different effects on a student's success in college. Early pivotal moments occur during a student's K-12 educational years. Students who experience early pivotal moments also experience positive adjustments to higher education, develop help-seeking behaviors, and ultimately achieve academic success (Espinoza, 2011). Late pivotal moments occur during postsecondary education. According to Espinoza (2011), students who experience late pivotal moments have difficulty adjusting to higher education, fewer help-seeking behaviors, and limited academic success.

Using the pivotal moment theory, this study focused on first-generation students with disabilities. This study's three primary research questions were: 1) Did first-generation students with disabilities in higher education experience pivotal moments in their K-16 schooling? 2) Did relationships with institutional agents help students with disabilities feel more prepared for college? 3) Did relationships with institutional agents help students with disabilities gain help-seeking skills?

## **METHODS**

This qualitative study used a combination of a case study approach and grounded theory to answer the research questions. The two methods allowed the researcher to analyze the data using the pivotal moment's framework while looking for new and emergent themes driven by the data. The sample consisted of ten first-generation college students, and the sampling method used was a purposeful sample. For this study, participants needed to meet specific criteria to be included in the sample. The criteria include:

1. Being a registered student at the selected university
2. Currently in their sophomore year or higher
3. Having a documented disability (registered with the disabilities services office)
4. Being a first-generation college student
5. Being age 18 or over

The selected university for this study was a public university in Southern California. All ten participants completed one-hour-long in-depth interviews. Eight interviews were in person, and two were over the phone. The interviews were recorded with a digital recorder. The semi-structured interview questions followed a specific sequence, and open-ended questions allowed participants to tell their stories. Each interview session began with a script that was reviewed and asked for informed consent. The interview recordings were transcribed, and the transcriptions were compared to the recordings and checked for accuracy. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants and used on the transcripts.

**TABLE 1**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS**

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Disability (as described by Participant)	School Setting (K-12)	Current year of school
Jessica	39	Female	Caucasian	Specific Learning Disability	SpEd	Grad
Jacob	50	Male	Caucasian	Visual Impairment	SpEd	Grad
Diego	20	Male	Hispanic	Orthopedic Impairment	GenEd	Soph
Carlos	29	Male	Hispanic	Emotional/Behavioral Disability and Learning Disabilities	SpEd	Senior
Nick	20	Male	Caucasian	Orthopedic Impairment and Traumatic Brain Injury	SpEd	Soph
Stephanie	21	Female	Caucasian	Orthopedic Impairment	GenEd	Soph
Ashley	39	Female	African American	Specific Learning Disability and Gifted	GenEd	Grad
Jesus	31	Male	Hispanic	Speech or Language Impairment and Other Health Impairment	SpEd	Grad
Debra	54	Female	Caucasian	Hearing Impairment	SpEd	Senior
Alice	44	Female	Asian	Emotional/Behavioral Disability	GenEd	Senior

## RESULTS

All ten participants experienced a pivotal moment based on the data analysis, but the timing and intensity varied. For the analysis, the intensity was determined based on the amount of knowledge transmitted and the time the participants had a relationship with the pivotal moment institutional agent. Timing had an impact on the participants' college readiness and adjustment. Participants who experienced multiple or more intense pivotal moments had high help-seeking skills.

### Pivotal Moments and Timing

The timing of the pivotal moment is important because it affects student outcomes. Students who experience early pivotal moments adjust well to higher education, develop help-seeking behaviors, and ultimately achieve academic success (Espinoza, 2011). Late pivotal moments lead to difficulty adjusting to higher education, the development of fewer help-seeking behaviors, and limited academic success (Espinoza, 2011). Table 2 shows the timing of the earliest pivotal moment for each participant.

Seven participants experienced early pivotal moments. Early pivotal moments can occur between kindergarten and high school graduation. Three participants reported pivotal moments in elementary/middle school, and four reported pivotal moments during high school. Many participants with early pivotal moments couldn't recall teachers speaking specifically about college. Still, they remember feeling intelligent, understood, and cared for, and encouraged to enrich their academic experiences. The following participants' experience helps illustrate an early pivotal moment. Jacob had a middle school teacher, Mrs. U, who he described as very strict but supportive. She saw that he had strength in writing and encouraged Jacob to be a journalist when he grew up. She always commented on his high test scores and encouraged him to be a teacher's aide in math. Jacob feels that Mrs. U. implied that he will attend college through her actions and words.

Three participants experienced late pivotal moments during college. All three students struggled with the transition to college and help-seeking behaviors. They found themselves in college after several attempts using trial and error. Jesus and Alice's stories convey the obstacles first-generation college students with disabilities face when they do not experience an early pivotal moment. Jesus stated, "I didn't really hear teachers talk about college and what to do...And my main thing was just I need to graduate high school." Alice attempted several times to complete her associate degree but failed without support. It was not until she experienced a pivotal moment with a community college professor that she could complete her degree.

**TABLE 2  
TIMING OF EARLIEST PIVOTAL MOMENT**

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Early/Late Pivotal Moment	Earliest PM
Jessica	Female	White	Early	Elementary school
Jacob	Male	White	Early	Elementary school
Diego	Male	Hispanic	Early	Elementary/Middle school
Carlos	Male	Hispanic	Early	High school
Nick	Male	White	Early	High school
Stephanie	Female	White	Early	High school
Ashley	Female	Black	Early	High school
Jesus	Male	Hispanic	Late	College
Debra	Female	White	Late	College
Alice	Female	Asian	Late	College

**Timing and College Preparedness**

Four participants with early pivotal moments recalled transferring college knowledge before college and feeling more prepared for college (see Table 3). Stephanie felt that her high school counselor had the most significant influence on her. Stephanie recalls, "I was in the counseling office a lot because I had to

deal with all my medical work and school stuff. I feel like she helped me and pushed me, showing me where to go and how to sign up for financial aid.”

Jessica and Nick experienced problems adjusting to college due to insufficient academic preparation. Both participants spent part of their academic day in special education classes throughout high school. Jessica reported having a difficult transition from high school to college. She also needed help-seeking skills and college knowledge. “I didn’t even know what the term meant, junior college, you know, it’s kind of like what’s, what’s the difference between junior college and a four-year college?” This lack of college knowledge made it difficult for Jessica to navigate college, which led to her spending an extended amount of time in community college. Nick attended a four-year university directly from high school and reported difficulty adjusting to college life. “I didn’t feel as prepared going into college. I just felt like my friends [in general education classes] ... they learned a little more than I did.”

The three participants who experienced late pivotal moments did not have a transfer of college knowledge before college and used trial and error to gain college knowledge. Jesus spent ten years in community college because he didn’t have the necessary information to navigate the system successfully. Alice faced many challenges as she struggled to complete her degree. She reported feeling very lonely, as though she had to do it on her own. Debra credits her college-educated daughter with introducing her to the disability services office.

### **Timing and Help-Seeking Skills**

Seven participants experienced early pivotal moments. Three participants reported high levels of help-seeking behaviors. Four participants acquired help-seeking skills during college. One participant was still struggling with help-seeking skills (see Table 3). Three participants experienced late pivotal moments. Two developed help-seeking skills during college, and one was still struggling.

#### *Early Pivotal Moments and Help-Seeking Behaviors*

The participants who experienced early pivotal moments had vastly different educational paths. The three participants with help-seeking skills experienced multiple and significant pivotal moments with educators. They all had a transfer of academic and college knowledge from the pivotal moments educators led them to an excellent adjustment to higher education and academic success: two participants, Jacob and Diego, credit institutional agents for teaching them help-seeking behaviors. Jacob’s early pivotal moments paved the way to future college success. Jacob learned to ask for help when he needed it and then learned to cope without help when he didn’t receive it. By middle school, Jacob learned to utilize different resources to get the help he needed in the classroom. He could ask for help in college and use his strong social network to gain valuable resources and contacts, such as the Department of Rehabilitation. He also knew how to contact the Disability Services Office to see what support he could get while attending college.

Two participants gained help-seeking skills in college. Ashley created a network of support through her professors. She learned to be persistent until she got the support she needed. “Because people didn’t believe I had it [a disability], they thought I was making an excuse. They were reluctant to help because all you can do in a college is ask people to give you the services.” Encouraged by some of her professors, she requested support until she received what she needed. By the time she graduated from college, she had a letter of recommendation and an introduction to graduate school. Jessica struggled in community college for years until she sought out help from the disability services office, and that changed her trajectory. She began building a support network with her professors and receiving much-needed accommodation. The Department Chair was Jessica’s biggest supporter and advocate for Jessica when needed.

One participant reported still struggling with help-seeking skills. Carlos was in general education classes after exiting special education during high school. After high school, Carlos attended a small private college. Carlos reported struggling academically; by his second year, he lost his scholarship. Losing the financial assistance from the scholarship made it impossible for Carlos to continue at the private college. No one offered help, and Carlos did not know who to ask for help. He feels that being exited from special education was an obstacle because he did not go into college with a documented disability. “It’s like they gear you out of high school trying to look your best to get into college, so you don’t want to put that on

your [application] that you have a learning disability... I wasn't really able to get service for my learning disability, and it really messed up my college life, like my four-year scholarship."

*Late Pivotal Moments and Help-Seeking Behaviors*

Jesus, Debra, and Alice experienced a late pivotal moment and had multiple problems to overcome (see Table 3). Jesus attended both general education and special education classes in high school. Jesus does not recall anyone talking to him about going to college; the focus was high school graduation, so he didn't feel prepared to attend college. Jesus reported feeling lost once he graduated. He knew getting a college degree would help him get a good job, but Jesus struggled academically and with the process. "A two-year junior college ended up becoming ten years because I didn't know exactly how to navigate or how to study because this [college] was completely different." Debra also experienced multiple problems when transferring to college. In high school, she attended general education classes. She did not attend college right out of high school. Debra attempted to attend a community college but wasn't successful in navigating the experience. Like Debra, Alice did not attend college right out of high school. In high school, she attended all general education classes. Alice struggled to participate in a community college. Alice reported spending many years in and out of college, navigating the system, and making up for her lack of academic preparation. Without any early pivotal moments, these three participants were unprepared for college and did not adjust; instead, they faced several obstacles.

**TABLE 3  
TIMING, COLLEGE PREPAREDNESS, AND HELP-SEEKING SKILLS**

Pseudonym	Early/Late Pivotal Moment	College preparedness	Help-seeking behaviors	Participant's perception of who taught them help-seeking behaviors
Jacob	Early	Prepared for college	Possess help-seeking behaviors	Teachers
Diego	Early	Prepared for college	Possess help-seeking behaviors	Counselor, Teachers, Coaches, Parents
Stephanie	Early	Prepared for college	Possess help-seeking behaviors	Parent
Ashley	Early	Prepared for college	Acquired during college	Professors, Self
Jessica	Early	Some problems adjusting	Acquired during college	Disability Services office, Professors
Nick	Early	Some problems adjusting	Possess help-seeking behaviors	Parent
Carlos	Early	Multiple problems	Still struggling	No one
Jesus	Late	Multiple problems	Acquired during college	Professors, counselors
Debra	Late	Multiple problems	Acquired during college	Counselor
Alice	Late	Multiple problems	Still struggling	No one

### **Academic Preparation**

The experiences of all ten participants illustrate that students with disabilities can meet the same standards when given the proper support (Scruggs et al., 2013; Thurlow & Quenenmoen, 2012). All ten participants graduated from high school with a regular diploma. Of the seven participants who experienced an early pivotal moment, four reported experiencing relationships that led to academic preparation, a transfer of college knowledge, and acquired help-seeking skills. Two participants who experienced early pivotal moments reported some problems adjusting to college. They needed more developed relationships, including gaps in support and mentoring and lacking academic and college knowledge support during their K-12 education. One participant had a transfer of college knowledge that supported them in gaining access to scholarships and college entry but reported a lack of academic preparation and no acquisition of help-seeking skills. The three participants who experienced late pivotal moments reported a lack of transmission of college knowledge before college. They were not prepared for college academically, but they acquired help-seeking skills while in college. One participant was still struggling to adapt to college and gain help-seeking skills. One of the effects of this lack of support was that all three participants spent more time completing college than a typical student.

### **Transition**

When students with disabilities transition from K-12 schooling to college, the laws that govern accommodations and support also change. This information is not always clear to the student (Brinckerhoff, 1996; Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The participants in this study all transitioned to college; however, not all of them transitioned smoothly. Only three of the seven participants who experienced early pivotal moments reported transitioning to college with full knowledge of support and accommodations. The other four participants who had early pivotal moments and the three participants who experienced late pivotal moments reported missing out on accommodations because of a lack of knowledge and access to services. Attending transition meetings and having the outcomes be student-centered has been a barrier to transition services offered to students with disabilities (Powers et al.; Williams & O'Leary, 2001). Three of the students who reported an early pivotal moment would have had a transition I.E.P. meeting. However, only two reported attending I.E.P. meetings, and both reported having problems adjusting to college and overcoming many obstacles (including academics). Of the late pivotal moments, all three were exited or were not in special education and, therefore, did not attend a transition meeting.

### **Self-Advocacy/Help-Seeking**

Six participants who experienced early pivotal moments reported acquiring self-advocacy/help-seeking skills. Two of the three participants who experienced late pivotal moments reported developing help-seeking behaviors. Eight of the ten participants reported having acquired some help-seeking skills. Those eight participants experienced higher academic success and a better adjustment to college than the two participants who struggled to gain help-seeking behaviors. This reflects the literature that states that students with disabilities who report high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to experience academic success (Zheng et al., 2012). It also illustrates Espinoza's pivotal moments. The students who experienced pivotal moments gained essential knowledge and skills to succeed in college.

## **DISCUSSION**

Students with disabilities face unique obstacles in their transition to postsecondary education, yet they want to pursue the same educational opportunities as their general education peers (Newman et al., 2011). Research on pivotal moments found that relationships with institutional agents could put first-generation students on the path to a four-year college (Espinoza, 2011). This study has added the element of students with disabilities to the pivotal moment's theory to connect social and cultural capital with the postsecondary transition for youth with disabilities (Espinoza, 2011; Trainor, 2008). The findings support the pivotal moment's theory as participants who experienced multiple early pivotal moments had the easiest time adjusting to college and acquiring help-seeking skills. The outcomes of participants who experienced late



pivotal moments also reflected the pivotal moment's theory. Participants experienced difficulty adjusting to college and difficulty developing help-seeking skills.

Two findings are notable. First, both students with emotional behavior disabilities (EBD) reported multiple problems adjusting to college and struggled with help-seeking skills. This was not a surprise, as a defining characteristic of EBD is an inability to build or maintain satisfactory relationships with others (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Second, two participants who experienced late pivotal moments developed help-seeking skills in college and eventually experienced successful outcomes.

The most notable finding is that first-generation college students with disabilities can achieve positive academic outcomes from pivotal moment relationships. With the support of pivotal moment educators, students with disabilities who have multiple obstacles to overcome can successfully obtain a college degree.

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