

Research the Resonates
Villanova CLAS Podcast
Episode 6 Transcription
Youth and Identity: Strengths and Struggles

HOST: Chelsea Gerrard

Guest 1 (SH): Stacey Havlik, PhD

Guest 2 (KM): Krista Malott, PhD

Guest 3 (JD): Jose Diaz '19 MS

Intro: *Instrumental music "Pomp and Circumstance," plays in the background.*

SH: There's a lot of literature out there on the challenges of first-generation college students, so, one thing that we were looking for was, what are the strengths of first-generation students, and what do they bring to the university and how do they enhance it? And, I think one thing that struck us as researchers was this idea of first-generation as a strength. A lot of the students reported that there's a pride that comes with being first generation—that sense of, I'm gonna be the first in my family to graduate. I'm gonna be the first in my family to have a college degree, was really important for a lot of the students.

HOST: That's Stacey Havlik. She's an associate professor in the department of Education and Counseling at Villanova University. She's been doing research on first-generation college students in close collaboration with her colleague, Krista Malott. For their research, they interviewed first-generation college students and then designed an intervention curriculum to better prepare them for college.

KM: Hi, this is Krista Malott from the department of Education and Counseling. We tried to build a curriculum that sort of included both strengths and challenges within the curriculum, and in particular, we really tried to create sessions for students where they spent time really thinking about: what aspects of myself am I really proud of? How does that give me strength and resilience? How does that help me overcome challenges and difficulties that many of us have?

HOST: You're listening to Research that Resonates, a podcast from Villanova University's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences that takes you inside the labs and classrooms to learn from our distinguished faculty and students. I'm your host, Chelsea Gerrard. In this miniseries we're talking to research teams who are exploring topics at the intersection of youth and identity. I sat down with Dr. Havlik, Dr. Malott and one of their graduate students, Jose Diaz, who's a first-generation student himself, to talk about their research.

JD: So, my name's Jose Diaz. I am in the department of Education and Counseling. I am a second year graduate student on the school side of the counseling track. And, I am a first-generation college student, both on the bachelor's level and on the master's level, as well.

- HOST: Jose worked with Dr. Havlik and Dr. Malott for two years. As a first-generation college student himself, this project immediately resonated with him.
- JD: The moment that I heard about it, I knew I wanted to be a part of it. It brought a big smile to my face and it reminded me of the counseling group that I was a part of when I was in high school. So, I saw the effect that the counseling, the group counseling, had on me as a senior in high school, and I thought, this is the perfect opportunity to give back and to really connect to this new generation of first-generation students.
- HOST: There can be discrepancies between definitions of First-Generation college students. For the purposes of this study, the research team defined first-gen as a student whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree. The research team first wanted to understand the lived experiences of first-generation college students, so they ran focus groups with first-gen students at Villanova. They asked them questions in general, and questions about the challenges and strengths of being a first-gen student. As for the challenges—students reported feeling a sense of otherness, or like they didn't belong, not only because of their first-generation status but also because of other identities including race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Here's Dr. Malott.
- KM: They felt that they were struggling with challenges around differences, a sense of otherness, or maybe being on the outside when it came to maybe being able to afford the opportunities or the experiences that their other peers were experiencing. So there was some socioeconomic differences, some challenges. Not all first-gen students struggle socioeconomically, but many of these students did, and statistically many do across the nation. And then, also socially and just navigating the college campus, just figuring out things like, where is the bursar's office? What is the bursar's office? What do I do if I'm failing in a class? How do I get extra help? Um, how do I join a study group?...and feeling sometimes excluded from study groups, maybe because they're not figuring out how to navigate the cultural norms of how to find them or access them.
- The thing that we wanted to look at that was a little bit unique from what we saw in the first-gen research was the intersectional otherness that they were experiencing. It wasn't just feeling like you were on the outside because you're first-gen...
- SH: Right.
- KM: Or just feeling like you're on the outside because you're a person of color or a student from another country, but it's the intersection of all those that felt more pervasive and so really emphasized a sense of otherness for multiple categories of their identities.
- HOST: But as we heard from Dr. Havlik, another theme in the research was the students' pride in their identities. Here she is again.
- SH: We had students talk about maybe their racial identity and say, that's a strength for me. So, even when they were in this predominantly white institution, maybe that was also a sense of otherness that they felt, but it was also, there was also pride that came with that identity and a strength that came with that. So, I think that's one finding that was particularly important with this study, and something that is important I think for all

researchers to consider is that there's not just challenges that come with first-generation, but there's a lot of strength that the students bring.

HOST: These findings helped inform the next piece of their research. Dr. Havlik and Dr. Malott created an 8-session counseling curriculum designed to prepare first-gen students for college. They piloted the study in a Philadelphia high school in 2017. Here's Dr. Havlik again.

SH: There's a decent amount of research on different types of interventions to prepare students for college, but most of those interventions focus on things like financial aid, time management, scheduling, picking classes, just those tangible aspects of college. And so, what our intervention added was first the small group counseling element—so most interventions aren't necessarily done in a small group format—but then also, that concept of identity.

HOST: Dr. Havlik and Dr. Malott really saw themselves as facilitators of the sessions—rather than lecturers. The sessions utilized activities such as creating an identity shield—which was a physical shield on which they wrote their identities—and small group discussions about things like building resiliency. Jose co-facilitated these groups as well.

JD: We went through a lot of different themes: social supports, navigating campus survival, utilizing different centers on campus, connecting with community and family resources back at home—and how students can utilize that as a strength. And then, also joining different organizations on campus that fit their identities to capitalize on their strengths and continue to explore that as well. It was nice to see how powerful it actually was and how insightful it was to those students.

HOST: Jose was instrumental in forging a relationship with the school, recruiting students for the study, and conducting qualitative interviews with students after the study. Dr. Malott added that his perspective was a great benefit, not only to the research itself, but also to the student participants.

KM: Having Jose involved in the research has been fantastic. He's giving us a lot of insights around the experience of being first-gen, but also, I got to co-facilitate a group with him, and so, to see the students responding to him because he was first-gen, and he's also a person of color, and so he was really able to speak frankly of those experiences and how meaningful that really was to the students and they really listened to him.

HOST: Part of the team's objectives with this study was to develop an evidenced-based practice—so they looked at how the curriculum positively affected two things. First, they looked at the student's sense of self-efficacy—which is the student's perception of their ability to go to college and be successful. Second, the researchers looked at outcomes expectation—which is the student's belief in his or herself that they can go to college and achieve that degree. The researchers theorized that the eight-session curriculum would improve the students' sense of self-efficacy and outcomes expectation. To measure this, they gave the students a survey before and after having

gone through the curriculum. Additionally, they conducted qualitative interviews with the students. Here's Dr. Havlik explaining the results.

- SH: There was an increase. So we found that from the beginning to the end there was an increase in student self-efficacy and an increase in students' outcome expectations. However, that was statistically insignificant. So, we also included qualitative data, written data and interviews. So what was that students felt that they gained a stronger sense of self-confidence through being part of this group. They felt that it, they were able to see their peers in a different way because they were able to share experiences with their peers and see that they had the same struggles, which ultimately made them feel like, okay, if they can do it, if they're struggling too, then I can do this too. That's okay 'cause we're all struggling and we're all gonna be okay.
- HOST: The results show real promise and practical application, so their next step is to scale the study. At the point of this recording, the research team had about 40 students participate across four different groups. They are in the process of reaching out to other sites to conduct the study and identifying funding opportunities so that they can run more groups and collect more data.
- SH: A big part of it is having this intervention that's available to school counselors. So our broader hope would be that school counselors are able to use this intervention. It's free for them to use and it's able to impact more students. It could really have a broad impact.
- KM: Yeah, it could definitely be picked up and used by after school programs, first-gen programs in specific, and so it is very practical and useful. Part of the reason why I feel like the research we're doing is really important is because it provides an evidence-based intervention that people can use, but of course adapt to the settings that they're in.
- HOST: Assisting with this research and co-facilitating the groups certainly influenced Jose as a practitioner.
- JD: It's hard to find the words, but it's so insightful. It's built my confidence. It's built my ability to relate more to students and to get out there and to continue embracing this identity. I was once that student, but now I can be more of that leader that is influencing the students as they move forward.
- HOST: Thanks for listening to Research that Resonates. If you haven't listened to our first mini-series on Sustainability, be sure to check that out on Apple Podcasts, Google Play and Spotify.