



# HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

Harvard Graduate School of Education Research Doctoral Colloquium

## **Big Enough to Bother Them?: When Low-Income, First-Generation Students Seek Help from Support Programs**

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**<https://harvard.zoom.us/j/94358178234>**

### **Abstract**

Low-income, first-generation (LIFG) students complete college at disproportionately low rates compared to their higher-income and continuing-generation peers. Actors across federal, state, and institutional levels have developed a wide variety of support programs to increase the retention and graduation rates of this group, and typically measure program impact through quantitative outcomes or one-time interviews. In contrast, few studies examine how students experience these programs and how participation actually helps them resolve social and structural barriers to success. This study draws on in-depth, longitudinal interviews conducted with eight female LIFG college students over the course of their first year to understand how they experience, utilize, and find value in two different student support programs at one public, four-year university. I find that study participants encountered a wide range of financial, health, and academic challenges over the course of their first year. Many of the negative effects of these challenges could have been mitigated by reaching out to a staff member, but whether they turned to programs for help depended on their help-seeking orientations and the strength of relationships they had with program staff. Further, the mandatory, bi-weekly meeting structure of one program enabled more consistent relationship building than the opt-in meeting structure of the second.