

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

First-Generation College Student Balances Family Crises and Coursework

Purpose: This vignette highlights how a student who has experienced academic success may need additional support when an unexpected personal, financial or familial crisis emerges.

Student Vignette: Sergio (19-year-old man who is a STEM major) completed his first year of college with a 3.2 GPA. As a first-generation college student, he struggled with the imposter phenomenon. He wants to be a role model for his two younger sisters and hopes to achieve stability that could reduce the burden for his parents who work at a meat packing plant. At the start of his second year, one of his younger sisters is injured in an accident and his mother loses her job while taking time off work to care for her daughter. In addition to traveling home on the weekends to help his family, he also picks up an overnight shift at a gas station so he can send money home. He falls behind on assignments in a math class that he needs to complete to stay on track with the engineering sequence. During a meeting with the student, you encourage him to reach out to his professor to develop a plan. Sergio returns to your office the next day in tears, “I guess I don’t have what it takes. I don’t know how I am going to tell my parents that I failed.” The instructor told him that assignment due dates were clearly posted and that it would be unfair to make exceptions. The instructor pointed to his low grade on the midterm exam (which had occurred the week that he started the overnight shift at the gas station) and suggested that engineering may be unrealistic. In a previous interaction you had with this instructor, she explained how the program is held to rigorous accreditation and professional standards. In addition, she felt responsible for ensuring that students achieved learning outcomes in entry-level classes because they were prerequisites for more challenging upper-level classes.

Guiding Questions:

1. Have you seen similar situations? If so, briefly reflect on those experiences. How did you support the student? What was successful? What was not successful?
2. What is the key issue(s) that needs to be addressed to support the student before the semester ends? What resources exist on campus to support this student? What are the student’s strengths that can be leveraged?
3. Consider your professional role (e.g., academic advisor, program director, faculty, registrar, etc.). How could you support the student? How could you connect the student to different people and resources on campus? What would you say to the student? How might you guide the professor in better supporting the student? What type of support would you need to make this happen?
4. Reflect the concept of ecological validation. How could the norms framing student interactions (holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, and developmental) and the work of educators (collaborative and reflective) be leveraged to support this student?
5. What policies and practices across campus could be adjusted to support students in similar situations? What would be the process of making those adjustments? Who would need to be involved? What are the next steps?