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Active Learning and Interpersonal Skills Development among First-Generation College Students

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Abstract: Scholars have detailed the benefits of active learning, particularly the impact that simulations can have on promoting engagement and evaluative thinking. Scholars have discussed the positive effects of active learning on first-generation college students, but there is minimal research on how simulations contribute to developing interpersonal skills, especially among first-generation college students. Interpersonal skills, often referred to as soft skills, are challenging to quantify since they focus on how individuals relate and interact with others. These skills include oral and written communication, teamwork, confidence, and leadership skills. This article examines whether stimulations taught within an active learning environment contributed to developing interpersonal skills among first-generation college students. In a retrospective survey administered at a single campus, our findings suggest that active learning contributes to the building of cultural capital for first-generation college students and also contributes developing interpersonal skills for both first-generation and second-generation college students.

Resumen: Los especialistas describieron los beneficios del aprendizaje activo, en especial el impacto que las simulaciones pueden ejercer sobre la mejora en la participación y el razonamiento evaluativo. Asimismo, analizaron los efectos positivos del aprendizaje activo en los estudiantes universitarios de primera generación; sin embargo, existe una investigación muy escasa en relación con la forma en la que las simulaciones contribuyen al desarrollo de las habilidades interpersonales, sobre todo en este tipo de estudiantes. Las habilidades interpersonales, conocidas también como "habilidades blandas," resultan difíciles de cuantificar, dado que se enfocan en la forma en la que las personas se relacionan e interactúan con los demás. Incluyen la comunicación oral y escrita, el trabajo en equipo, la confianza y las habilidades de liderazgo. En este artículo, se evalúa si las simulaciones que se enseñaron en el entorno de una actividad de aprendizaje activo contribuyeron con el desarrollo de las habilidades interpersonales en estudiantes universitarios de primera generación. La información obtenida en una encuesta retrospectiva que se realizó en un solo campus revela que el aprendizaje activo ayuda a incrementar el caudal cultural de los estudiantes universitarios de primera generación, al igual que a desarrollar las habilidades interpersonales, tanto en estos estudiantes como en los de segunda generación.

Résumé: Des chercheurs ont détaillé les avantages de l'apprentissage actif, tout particulièrement l'impact que les simulations pouvaient avoir sur

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l'encouragement de l'implication et de la pensée évaluative. Ils ont abordé les effets positifs de l'apprentissage actif sur les étudiants universitaires de première génération, mais très peu de recherches ont été effectuées sur la manière dont les simulations contribuaient au développement des compétences interpersonnelles, en particulier chez les étudiants universitaires de première génération. Les compétences interpersonnelles, souvent désignées en tant que compétences comportementales, sont difficiles à quantifier car elles se concentrent sur la façon dont les individus communiquent et interagissent ensemble. Ces compétences comprennent la communication orale et écrite, le travail d'équipe, la confiance en soi et les aptitudes en leadership. Cet article examine si les simulations menées dans le cadre d'un enseignement dans un environnement d'apprentissage actif ont contribué à développer les compétences interpersonnelles chez les étudiants universitaires de première génération. Nos conclusions basées sur une enquête rétrospective administrée dans un seul campus suggèrent que l'apprentissage actif contribue au développement d'un capital culturel chez les étudiants universitaires de première génération, ainsi qu'au développement de compétences interpersonnelles à la fois chez les étudiants universitaires de première et de deuxième génération.

Keywords: first-generation, simulations, active learning, interpersonal skills

Palabras clave: primera generación, simulaciones, aprendizaje activo, habilidades interpersonales

Mots clés: première génération, simulations, apprentissage actif, compétences interpersonnelles

Introduction

While the literature shows how active learning positively impacts first-generation college students' learning experience, significant gaps remain to assess the relationship between simulations and interpersonal skills development. Most of the research on simulations and interpersonal skills development has centered on business or physics, or applied programs like nursing (Bates and Galloway 2012; Khoiriyah, Roberts, and Jorm 2015; Walters, Potetz, and Fedesco 2017), with a few studies that focus on simulations in the social science disciplines (Sasley 2010; Figueroa 2014; Leib and Ruppel 2020).

Unlike most courses that utilize simulations or role-playing exercises to augment traditional lecture-based class, the Model United Nations (MUN) is specifically designed for students to participate in a five-day culminating experience in the National Model United Nations (NMUN) conference in New York. NMUN is an annual conference that offers students the opportunity to engage in a real-world simulation with other national and international universities to tackle a range of global topics from the perspective of their assigned country or organization. Students learn how diplomacy can effectively be used to solve or minimize global problems. The MUN course allows students to appreciate differing viewpoints, experience the challenges of negotiation and compromise, and gain a broader understanding of international relations.

Given the importance simulations have on student academic skill development, this article examines how simulations taught in an active learning environment promote student engagement in the course, particularly among first-generation college students. Moreover, we seek to explain how MUN simulations contribute to

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developing interpersonal skills, and how this experience varies between first-generation and second-generation college students. We do this by conducting a retrospective survey at a single campus where we asked former MUN students to reflect on their interpersonal skills level at the start of the course and after completing the course. We define interpersonal skills, otherwise known as soft or social skills, as behaviors that facilitate competence in interaction (Knapp and Daly 2011). In this analysis, interpersonal skills are grouped into verbal communication, academic skills, and leadership development. Verbal communication involves public speaking, interpersonal communication, and identifying and relating to one's target audience. Academic skills encompass multiple skills related to research, writing, organization, and time management. Leadership development refers to interpersonal communication, negotiation, teambuilding, collaborative decision-making, and active listening.

Conceptual Framework

This descriptive study explores whether using simulations in an active learning environment contributes to developing interpersonal skills, particularly for first-generation college students. We first begin with an overview of what distinguishes first-generation college students from second-generation college students. These distinctions shape individuals' "cultural and social capital" and influence how students navigate college (Pascarella et al. 2004; Collier and Morgan 2008). Next, the literature review section weaves two different strands of student development literature relevant to active learning and its impact on student success, particularly for first-generation college students and simulations in the classroom. Following the literature review, we explore the structure of the MUN course and its importance in strengthening students' interpersonal skills using active learning tools to provide a learning environment where students are encouraged to work in collaborative workspaces. Next, we introduce the methodology section. We conducted a one-campus retrospective study to measure how simulations, taught in an active learning environment, impacted the development of interpersonal skills for first-generation and second-generational students. Consistent with previous literature, our findings confirm that active learning greatly benefits first-generation college students. The research limitations section highlights the limitations of our study, particularly given the small sample size and one-campus study. Finally, in our discussion and conclusion, we address limitations of this study and offer recommendations for future studies that may wish to conduct a long-term survey that tracks specific interpersonal skill set and include additional interpersonal skills such as team building and collaboration.

First-Generation College Students

The term "first-generation college student" is commonly defined as a student whose parents did not complete a four-year college degree (Choy 2001; Pascarella et al. 2004; Davis 2010). However, a few scholars have questioned this limited definition, since it fails to consider students whose parents attended some college or completed a two-year degree (Paulsen and St. John 2002; Dubow, Boxer, and Huesman 2009). While these discussions indicate that future studies may advance a more comprehensive definition of a first-generation college student, this falls beyond this particular article's scope. When it comes to defining students who are not first-generation college students, scholars utilize several terms such as "second generation college students" (Pike and Kuh 2005), "traditional college students" (Terenzini et al. 1996), "continuing college student" (Martin Lohfink and Paulsen 2005), and "non-first-generation college student" (Murphy and Hicks 2006; Ramos-Sánchez and Nichols 2007; Costello et al. 2018). This article will utilize the term

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"first-generation" to signify students whose parents did not complete a bachelor's degree and "second-generation" to refer to students who have at least one parent who completed a bachelor's degree.

First-generation college students face several structural obstacles that second-generation students are unlikely to encounter. Some of these challenges include educational differences, degree of parental engagement, and financial concerns that can stifle academic success (Galina 2016). First-generation college students tend to be less academically prepared, have lower reading, mathematical, and critical thinking skills and are more likely to attend high schools with less rigorous curricula than students who have college attendance in their background (Richardson and Skinner 1992; Terenzini et al. 1996; Choy 2001; Davis 2010; Galina 2016). Further, they begin postsecondary education without the experience or knowledge "about being competent and comfortable navigating the higher-education landscape, about growing up in a home environment that promotes the college and university culture" (Davis 2010, 19).

First-generation college students tend to interact with faculty less frequently and are less likely than second-generation college students to view faculty as concerned about their success (Terenzini et al. 1996; Martin Lohfink and Paulsen 2005). Arguably, this lack of interaction with faculty can also explain why first-generation college students often struggle with feelings of isolation and a sense of invisibility as if they do not belong. This sense of belonging is understood as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow 1993, 80).

Collier and Morgan (2008) examine how faculty expectations and student understanding of said expectations result in different outcomes for first-generation and second-generation college students. Their study concludes that the lack of implicit knowledge, what they define as "cultural capital" results in academic success between first-generation and second-generation students. Cultural capital is defined as "preexisting knowledge about interacting successfully in academic settings, including such essentially social skills as the ability to recognize and respond to the standards faculty members use when they evaluate assignments" (Collier and Morgan 2008, 429). Variations in cultural and social capital, determined by parents' education level, influence how likely students can successfully navigate college (e.g., understanding the significance of the syllabus, what "office hours" means, or how to cite sources in written assignments) (Collier and Morgan 2008).

Literature Review

Student development theory provides a cohesive framework to understand college students' growth to grasp how individuals cultivate academic and social engagement, build the requisite academic skills, foster relationships with peers and faculty, and develop a sense of belonging at college. This article builds upon previous theoretical work on the impact of active learning environments and student success, especially for first-generation college students. Active learning is an instructional approach designed to move away from a teaching-centric approach to a learning-centric approach (Barr and Tagg 1995). Active learning allows the student to be engaged in the learning process instead of a traditional lecture format, where students passively receive information from the instructor (Prince 2004; Felder and Brent 2009; Sasley 2010). Expressly, active learning is understood as "having students engage in some activity that forces them to reflect upon ideas and how they are using those ideas. Requiring students to regularly assess their own degree of understanding and skill at handling concepts or problems in a particular discipline" (Michaels 2006, 160).

Studies have shown how active learning practices deepen learning and increase student engagement (Conefrey 2018). Unsurprisingly, first-generation college

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students and minorities have benefited the most from these practices. In response to evidence of successful teaching and learning practices, universities around the country have developed and implemented institutionally structured experiences to promote more equitable access to learning. These high-impact practices (HIPs) assume many forms but traditionally include first-year seminars, learning communities, undergraduate research, ePortfolios, writing intensive courses, service-learning projects, collaborative assignments, and projects (Kuh 2012) that are designed to especially help first-generation college students build self-confidence and mitigate gaps in academic preparation to help them succeed. Furthermore, data suggest that students' engaging in multiple HIPs improves their literacy and study skills (Conefrey 2018).

Active Learning and First-Generation College Students

Active learning provides students with an opportunity to be directly engaged with the course's subject matter rather than simply learning and memorizing facts. While active learning benefits all students, studies have shown that first-generation college students benefit the most from this student-centered approach. First-generation students are more prone to be female, non-native English speakers, older, enrolled part time, coming from a lower family income level, and inhabiting intersecting sites of oppression based on race, class, and ethnicity (Terenzini et al. 1996; Chen and Carroll 2005; Martin Lohfink and Paulsen 2005). When diving deeper into understanding how interactive learning impacts minority and first-generation college students, McGlynn (2015) points out that Black and first-generation college students experienced positive effects in their learning outcomes with more active engagement in the course. Using more than thirty years of data, McGlynn (2015) found that students who are actively engaged in the classroom are more likely to be academically successful and more likely to complete a degree.

Studies have found that first-generation college students might be more dependent upon university faculty to create opportunities for them to interact with their peers (Inkelas et al. 2007). Filkins and Doyle (2002) observed that first-generation college students benefit more from educational practices that involve them in activities such as class presentations or participation in class discussions with faculty. To second Filkins and Doyle's results, Lundberg et al. (2007) identified that engagement with faculty at college and other university personnel may be especially beneficial for first-generation college students as these individuals can provide the necessary information, perspective, values, and socialization that may compensate for cultural capital missing for first-generation college students in their families. In Feldman and Newcomb's (1969) classic text, *The Impact of College on Students*, they found that college students' involvement in certain aspects of campus life led to successful outcomes in their abilities to succeed. Specifically, when looking at first-generation college students, they derived more significant benefits from peer interaction than other students, even though they might have significantly less chance of being engaged in such interactions during college (Pascarella et al. 2004).

Simulations in the Classroom

Simulations and their use in the classroom have been written on extensively (Queen 1984; McIntosh 2001; Hertel and Millis 2002; Galatas 2006; Haack 2008; Auman 2011; Silvia 2012), yet no clear consensus exists on whether simulations effectively contribute to an active learning environment and positively affect student learning. Simulations assume many forms ranging from role-playing, computerized games or as advanced as virtual reality. For the purpose of this study, simulations are defined as "concentrated learning exercises specifically designed to represent important real life activities by providing the learners with the essence or essential

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elements of the real situation without the hazards, costs, or time constraints" (Queen 1984, 144).

One of the central concerns raised about simulations is that they foster surface learners rather than deep learners. Surface learning refers to the acceptance and memorization of information as isolated and unlinked facts to perform well on examinations, which results in a superficial retention of material. By contrast, deep learning involves the critical analysis of new ideas, making links to existing knowledge of concepts and principles, which leads to understanding and long-term retention of concepts that can be utilized for problem solving when faced with unfamiliar contexts (Houghton 2004). A surface learner focuses on acquiring information with little to no connection with previous knowledge, whereas the deep learner relates new information with previous knowledge. Surface learners memorize facts and concepts without understanding the context of these facts and concepts with experience, whereas deep learners relate theoretical concepts and fundamental principles to actual experience (Atherton 2014).

Moreover, if the simulation's purpose is unclear to students, then even a well-designed simulation can prove ineffective. Lane and Peres (2006) explore the benefits of teaching statistics via computer simulation using a query-first method to introduce students to a set of questions that they will eventually interact with in the computer simulation. Students then use the simulation to determine if their initial responses were correct. These authors caution that if student interaction with the simulation is not carefully constructed, the simulation may not be an effective tool.

Regardless, simulations are an effective tool for faculty to reinvigorate class material and promote a more active learning environment, but the simulation itself does not create active learners. Scholars stress the utility of simulations and role-playing to engage students and facilitate learning hard to grasp theoretical concepts in subjects such as international relations (McIntosh 2001; Galatas 2006). Activities such as simulations and role-playing can promote a lively classroom. However, if these activities are not adequately incorporated into the classroom to help students develop theoretical frameworks, then these activities, however entertaining, do not facilitate active learning. McIntosh (2001) argues that using MUN simulations in the classroom can expose students to an international world otherwise not well understood by merely reading a textbook. Simulations can promote active learning as students interact and learn to collaborate with one another to resolve pressing issues. Simulations can help students build on the knowledge learned from previous class sessions and apply them to "real-world" scenarios where students must make immediate and informed decisions based on available information. This active learning environment provides students with an opportunity to be directly engaged with the subject matter of the course rather than simply learning and memorizing facts. Haack (2008, 408) argues that simulations must be intrinsically linked with other course-building exercises "where theoretical-conceptual learning supports and interacts with experiential learning of simulations."

When simulations are intrinsically linked with other course-building exercises, this not only engages students with the potential to maximize learning, but can also enhance course curriculum and achieve learning outcomes. Silvia (2012) demonstrates how a multi-role, multi-session simulation can be an effective tool to introduce students to urban policy issues when students have the opportunity to build on knowledge. This simulation was the final culmination project of an urban policy course that first provided students with a foundational background and exposure to various policy issues that they would eventually confront in the simulation. Like Lane and Peres (2006), this prior exposure to issues that students would later grapple within the simulation allowed students to build on knowledge previously acquired. "One strength of using role-playing simulations in the classroom is that they give students an opportunity to tackle ill-defined problems, for which there is no 'correct' answer, in a realistic setting" (Silvia 2012, 416).

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Simulations can also contribute to the development of analytical skills. Figueroa (2014) examines how simulations utilized in an American government course contribute to building student confidence, improving learning outcomes, and developing leadership skills. His findings suggest that classroom simulations are more effective than computer simulations at building leadership skills because they involve more collaborative interaction. Furthermore, some simulations, such as his Presidential White House Forum, are more conducive to students understanding the context of political decisions and appreciating different perspectives.

Leib and Ruppel (2020) examine whether different United Nations (UN) simulations are pedagogically effective and contribute to student learning outcomes. This study examines three different types of simulation: Security Council simulation, UN simulation, and the NMUN in New York. Leib and Ruppel conducted a pre and post survey to measure three types of knowledge in the learning outcomes: factual knowledge about the UN, procedural knowledge about the rules of procedure, and soft skills, such as giving speeches. Their study concluded that while the first two conferences did demonstrate support of acquiring either factual knowledge or some soft skill development, only the NMUN conference showed evidence that all three types of knowledge were achieved.

Sasley (2010) illustrates how simulations are also an effective tool for students to understand failed outcomes in international relations. In his Middle East simulation, Sasley assigned students different roles of actors within the region to illustrate notion of both conflict and cooperation. The debriefing is used as an opportunity where students reflect on why they could not reach an agreement. In this particular case, Sasley contends that the debriefing proved how students learned from these failures and, more importantly, identified what may have contributed to a successful outcome. Specifically, students developed a better understanding of the conditions under which cooperation was more likely to occur and that was only possible when students reevaluated why the simulation failed.

Despite the plethora of research on simulations, scholars have significantly understudied whether simulations contribute to developing first-generation students' interpersonal skills. One particular study by Mantovani and Castelnuovo (2003) explores how virtual two- and three-dimensional simulations and computer simulations help students learn soft skills. The authors are cautiously optimistic about the potential of virtual training but expressed concern that participants feel present (emotionally and cognitively) in the simulation. These concerns are linked not only to how the simulation is built into the course, but also on the ability of the faculty to provide structure so that the simulation feels real to students.

Nealy (2005) used an in-class simulation of an upper division management course that paired first-generation students with second-generation students to determine how simulation exercises helped improve communication, trust, and cultural awareness. Although Nealy's sample size was small (twenty first-generation students), her initial findings were positive, demonstrating that simulations improved interpersonal skills for first-generation and second-generation students.

Notwithstanding these efforts, no previous study has systematically estimated the extent to which first-generation college students' success (interpersonal skills) can be attributed to active learning engagement incorporated in simulations like the MUN course. The next section briefly explores the MUN course structure and how it is designed to promote a student-centered experience through various active learning techniques, including simulations, to enhance student learning and promote student success.

The Model United Nations

The MUN program consists of two courses taken consecutively in the fall and spring semesters. These courses allow students to gradually develop and build on said

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knowledge. This approach provides students a foundation of knowledge that slowly builds, and as students become more confident in their knowledge, they can make connections with new material discovered through research and interaction with delegates at the national conference.

The first course is the foundation course that teaches students about the UN, its history, organizational structure, and systemic factors that often serve as points of contention among member states. This course lays the groundwork for the MUN course by examining past and current UN missions on various international issues such as disarmament, environmental protection, sustainable development, and human rights to determine how effective member states and the UN have been at resolving these global challenges. The focus of this foundation course is not on the simulation but rather on the UN. In the final three weeks of the course, students are introduced to the committees and topics to be addressed at the conference. At this point in the course, students have a solid foundation of the UN as an international body, including its strengths and weaknesses, so shifting focus to committees and topics allow students the opportunity to build on existing knowledge by focusing on real-world issues, with which the UN currently grapples.

The second course, and the focus of this article, centers on preparing students for their role as ambassador, including class simulations ("mock sessions"), a local MUN conference, and the culminating NMUN conference simulation where students serve as an ambassador for a selected country. Student preparation for the role of ambassador to the UN requires students to accurately portray the issues from the represented country's perspective and position. Often, the issues students research for the NMUN conference hinge on their ability to understand the current political, economic, and social challenges a country faces, which are often rooted in historical development.

The MUN course relies heavily on active learning practices to promote a learning environment where students are encouraged to work in collaborative workspaces. Such practices include students being taught to research and write position papers, practice public speaking, and be proficient with the UN rules of procedures while interacting with member states in the simulation. This is a course ideally suited for first-generation college students as many of the recommended practices scholars cite for first-generation student academic success are built into this course. Several of these recommendations include a small class size where students can interact with faculty on a more frequent and consistent basis, activities designed to engage students and create opportunities for peer and collaborative learning, and transparency in assignments that promote equity in the classroom, thereby exposing the unwritten rules of college that first-generation students often confront on a day-to-day basis.

However, another central component of this course, and the focus of our study, is whether simulations in the classroom using an active learning approach contribute toward interpersonal skill set development, specifically for first-generation college students. Although this course involves three simulations, emphasis will focus on the mock sessions run in the classroom. In the next section, we first examine the practices built into the course that scholars attribute to student success. This will be followed with mock sessions and how the active learning environment contributes to a more realistic virtual setting that promotes interpersonal skills opportunities.

Peer Learning and Collaborative Learning Activities

Carver (2011, 203) discusses the importance of peer-assisted learning as a way of "encouraging first year students to help them develop the skills they need to be successful ... [and] aims to supplement students' understanding ... with the development of academic and work-related skills." The MUN class contributes to peer learning in a variety of ways. First, students are paired with another student for the

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duration of the class and work together to represent one committee at the NMUN conference. Second, the nature of committee work naturally lends itself to students working with their committee partner and other committee members since similar topics lend themselves to sharing research or relevant UN resolutions on the topic. Lastly, class activities that contribute to developing interpersonal skills, such as research and writing and public speaking, are done collaboratively.

From 2009 through 2018, the class size ranged from as few as ten students to as high as twenty-one students. Each year, a graduate assistant worked with the instructor to assist with grading and simulations, including attending the local and NMUN conference. The course capacity is capped at twenty-five students for pedagogical concerns, given the intensive research and writing components involve multiple iterations of drafts submitted for feedback. The small class size fosters an environment conducive to building trust and forging friendships that make interactions, both inside and outside the class, a more enriching experience. Students learn from their partners in the committee and other members of the class. The close-knit dynamic of the class also lends itself to study skills and test preparation. Students often organize study groups to prepare for exams, which is particularly advantageous for first-generation college students who tend to isolate themselves socially and academically.

Students work in pairs and are responsible for researching three topics for their respective committees from the perspective of the country they represent. NMUN determines which UN committees will be represented at the conference and the three topics each committee will discuss. For example, students who represented Peru in 2018 and sat on the Commission on the Status of Women were responsible for researching and writing on: Promoting the Involvement of Women and Youth in Government; Combating Violence against Women Migrant Workers; and Empowering Women and Girls in Rural Contexts. In these position papers, students must be able to identify the magnitude of this issue and why it poses a global problem. Furthermore, students must be aware of what the UN body has done to address the said issue, including how the particular country to be represented at NMUN conference has adhered to and implemented said UN resolutions. This level of detail requires that each pair of students understand what the UN has done about the issue, citing relevant resolutions and/or documents, but what remains to be done, noting constraints within the UN and the country represented. To aid students, rubrics are given to students for their research binders, which contain information on their country and committee topics, including their position paper. Rubrics have proven quite effective at clarifying what is expected and how an assignment is evaluated.

Since student learning outcomes focus on a student's ability to learn how to find, understand, and utilize basic political science research, an information literacy workshop is built into the course. The literacy workshop introduces students to various databases and teaches them how to access and cite sources, how to distinguish between scholarly and popular sources, primary and secondary, and how to use the research to support written and oral arguments. Students are provided an overview of how to conduct research using a general topic as an example to familiarize them with how to search and determine the validity of information obtained from online sources that are not academic in scope. Students are then encouraged to share how they would search for their committee topics.

This collaborative learning environment minimizes stress, particularly among first-generation college students, and focuses on developing and building academic skills. These exercises bred familiarity among students, which contributed to a classroom environment where students felt comfortable asking questions and initiating meetings with their peers outside the classroom to form study groups and research groups.

Students are taught how to write a position paper effectively that provides a plethora of information while adhering to a one-page double-sided requirement

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per NMUN conference standards. First, students must explain why this particular issue is of global concern and what has been attempted thus far by the UN to correct this problem. Second, student must explain how the represented country has adhered to UN programs within the country as well as highlight any regional partnerships or unique programs to solve the problem. Finally, students are asked to think about why this issue remains so critical, in spite of UN efforts, and recommend solutions for the international community to strengthen efforts to address this global issue. Once students have a clear understanding of what has been accomplished and what remains, students can begin to understand some of the larger obstacles of what impedes success. This comprehension requires more than a superficial knowledge about the UN as an institution and has students building on information acquired in the foundation course. Students must first understand the structural and budgetary problems inherent in the UN, the challenges of collective action, and the capacity of political institutions of nations. These are the challenges that students will not only discuss with fellow ambassadors, but also attempt to incorporate in their negotiation efforts to reach some effective resolution/report at the NMUN conference.

Mock Sessions in an Active Learning Environment

Mock sessions are structured activities for students to transform into ambassadors who find themselves engaging in active dialogue with their fellow peers. What is critical about these mock sessions is that it creates a safe space for students to learn. If and when corrections need to be made, the mock session is paused to address any missteps in procedure. At the NMUN conference, work is completed in committee, during both formal and informal debate.

The MUN course allows students develop the skills needed to be an effective public speaker, as well as how to conduct themselves at the NMUN conference. To that end, mock sessions are structured to mimic the NMUN conference's experience to allow students to hone their speaking skills and become familiar with simulating the role of an ambassador. Students are provided instruction on how mock sessions will be introduced into the course using the comprehensive NMUN "Delegate Preparation Guide" that is provided to all NMUN delegates. Figure 1 provides students with a detailed understanding of conference proceedings, demonstrating how delegates must comport themselves (NMUN 2021, 20).

Prior to students attending the NMUN conference, they attend a local weekend conference in Riverside, California to expose them to the conference setting. This local conference allows students to employ the rules presented in the NMUN Delegate Preparation Guide to build confidence as students practice public speaking and negotiation skills with students from other universities in this MUN simulation. Given that the local conference is a replica of the NMUN Conference, it creates a structured learning environment enabling students to put into practice what was taught in the classroom. It allows students to practice their speaking time, turn-taking, and be exposed diverse perspectives often rooted in cultural differences among member states.

This experience is often a student's first exposure to a conference, and for several first-generation college students, it is the first time visiting another university campus. Students are encouraged to speak freely and not to be self-conscious about mistakes, as the local conference is seen as a learning experience to gauge what skills need to be honed for the NMUN conference. When students return to class, the first day is spent debriefing about their experiences from the conference. Students not only submit a reflection paper but also openly share their experience in class. In this debriefing, students are asked to look inward and assess their participation in the conference simulation, identifying positive accomplishments and missed

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FORMAL DEBATE	INFORMAL DEBATE (Suspension of the Meeting)

• Rules of procedure are enforced by the Chair;
• Delegates are expected to be in their seats and attentive;
• Delegates are expected to be respectful of other delegates and diplomatic;
• During formal debate, delegates will:
  ○ Be added to the speakers list and make speeches;
  ○ Raise points or motions;
• Electronic devices (i.e., laptops, tablet computers, and phones) should be used sparingly during formal debate for immediate conference-related business, such as checking the Hub or reading a speech. Research and revision of working papers should not be done during formal debate to show respect to the speaker.
	• Rules of procedure are not enforced by the Chair;
	• Delegates are expected to engage actively by walking around and discussing the topic with other delegates;
	• Delegates are expected to be diplomatic and respectful of other delegates;
	• During informal debate, delegates will:
	  ○ Draft working papers;
	  ○ Discuss and gather support for working papers and draft resolutions;
	  ○ Review work being done in other groups;
	• Electronic devices (i.e., laptops, tablet computers, and phones) can be used. Delegates may not use projectors or microphones during informal session.

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Figure 1. NMUN formal and informal debate chart.

opportunities, and think ahead to how they would change their behaviors for the NMUN conference in New York.

The simulation is embedded in the MUN class using an active learning approach where students are engaged with the instructor, the course content, and one another. The MUN course is unique because it permits the faculty member to create opportunities for students to interact with their peers and build on the cultural capital missing from first-generation college students (Inkelas et al. 2007).

Methodology

We administered a retrospective survey to measure how active learning through simulations affects first-generation college students' interpersonal skills. The survey was administered to 110 former MUN students at a public four-year institution situated in Southern California that is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. During the period of the study, enrollment of first-generation college students increased from 46 percent in 2009 to 58.6 percent in 2018. Hispanics made up 48 percent of the student population in 2009 and this percentage increased to 66 percent by 2018. In our survey, we asked participants to reflect on their interpersonal skill set development before the course and after completing the course. Using Qualtrics, the survey was administered to students enrolled in the MUN course between 2009 and 2018. Of the 110 surveys distributed, sixty-five (71 percent) participated in the survey conducted between July 23 and August 5, 2019. Given that the sample size is small, our response rate, more importantly, reflects an appropriate sample of the MUN course population.

Structurally, the survey focused on measuring first-generation and second-generation college students' interpersonal skill set development after the completion of the MUN course. Using data from the survey, we focused on understanding

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Table 1. Demographics of model UN participants

	First-generation students			Second-generation students		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Participants (*n*)*	17	21	38	12	10	22
Ethnicity (percent)						
American Indian	0	0	0	0	0	0
Asian/Pacific Islander	0	0	0	0	2	2
Black/African American	2	0	2	1	1	2
Hispanic/Latino	15	16	31	3	4	7
Mixed	0	4	4	2	1	3
White	0	1	1	7	2	9

*Five respondents chose not to report demographic data when completing the survey, which explains why the total equals sixty and not sixty-five students.

how students' verbal communication, academic skills, and leadership development have advanced since the completion of the course. To do so, we implement a simple means comparison to understand how active learning through class simulations impacted both first-generation and second-generation students before and after completion of the course. It is also important to mention that the standard deviation generated in table 3 is under the value of 1 due to the lack of dispersion from our small sample size. In addition, to get a first-hand understanding of how a student's academic skills and leadership development were impacted before and after the course, we looked at the data provided by first-generation college students from open-ended responses for question 27.

Before understanding the impact that the simulation had on interpersonal skill development, we summarize students' demographic data to provide an overview of how many first-generation students were enrolled in the course. Referring to the answers the participants provided to questions 2 and 4, we configured table 1 to confirm that many first-generation college students were enrolled in the MUN course. As we later show, first-generation college students' public speaking confidence levels improved after the completion of the course, in part because of the small class size and emphasis on utilizing an active learning approach to incorporate simulations. Relative to second-generation college students who also showed improvement, our primary focus is to address the importance of active learning through simulations that allows first-generation college students to use their interpersonal skills.

Next, we concentrate on participant answers from survey questions 1, 22, 23, 27, and 3; we aim to understand through the student's first-hand perspectives how simulations impacted a former student's verbal communication, academic skills, and leadership development. To account for how class stimulations influence first-generation and second-generation students, question 1 (Are you a first-generation college student?) was used to make such distinction. To determine how class stimulations affected first-generation and second-generation students, we began our analysis by looking at how students classified their interpersonal skills *before* and *after* taking the MUN course. Questions 22 (Before you enrolled in the MUN class, how confident were you in public speaking?) and 23 (Do you feel that your public speaking improved upon completion of this course?) were necessary for understanding the impact of class stimulations on developing former students' interpersonal skills. Questions 22 and 23 were both recoded from an ordinal scale variable into a dichotomous variable due to the small sample size that did not result in an extensive large range of responses.

Next, we used student's response from question 27 (What skill sets were strengthened after the Model UN experience that have proven helpful to your life today?) to

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understand whether the skill sets continue to prove useful. These reflective answers shown in table 3 capture the students' interpersonal skill development pertaining to three categories: verbal communication, academic skills, and leadership development. These responses directly illustrate how first-generation college students' interpersonal skills improved after completing the course.

To effectively capture whether the MUN course was unique to both first-generation and second-generation college students, we pulled the responses from Question 31 (Please describe how the MUN course was different from other courses you took as an undergraduate student) to understand how meaningful this particular class was on interpersonal skill set development.

For empirical reasons, this article focuses on simulations taught in an active learning environment. The results focus on the entire simulation experience utilized in the MUN course (mock sessions, local conference, and national conference). This study contributes to the existing literature on how college students benefit from active learning. Unlike previous research, we analyze original data to understand whether first-generation and second-generation college students respond to active learning and how this simulation affects interpersonal skills after completing college. By analyzing both first-generation and second-generation students, we uncover the extent to which the MUN course impacted a student's interpersonal skills by examining feedback from former students. Our analysis found that the link between active learning through simulation is beneficial for improving interpersonal skills such as verbal communication, academic skills, and leadership development.

Results

In this section, we now discuss our main results, assessing the effect the MUN course stimulation practices had on interpersonal skills development. The survey questions and results present evidence on the impact simulations have on both first-generation and second-generation college students' interpersonal skills. Table 2 provides a visualization of the results across differences in confidence levels of public speaking self-identified after completing the MUN course among first-generation and second-generation college students. We standardize all the outcome variables—providing the means and standard deviations to determine how salient simulations were to first-generation college students. Based on first-generation students' responses before starting the MUN course, the overall public speaking confidence levels were at 0.76. However, upon completion of the MUN course, the same first-generation college students' responses show that public speaking confidence levels increased to 0.97. We recognize these findings are insufficient to assert that one course can improve all first-generation college students' interpersonal skills. However, based on this one-campus study, what finding table 2 does support is that first-generation college students' verbal communication improved after completing the MUN course.

We also see that by having a course that practices active learning through stimulations can also improve second-generation students' verbal communication skills. Specifically, we can see that prior to second-generation students' enrollment, their public speaking confidence was at 0.83 and after the completion of the course, it improved to 0.94. Lastly, while the results from table 2 show that both first-generation and second-generation college students' confidence improved, first-generation students' confidence increased by 0.20 compared to second-generation students' confidence that increased by 0.9.

In this next section, we provide a thematic analysis of responses from first-generation college students to questions 27. The majority of student responses were positive, not just about the experience of the MUN course, but on the skills acquired upon completion of the course. Table 3 includes first-generation college students' responses to how their interpersonal skills (verbal communication, academic skills,

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Table 2. MUN student confidence levels of public speaking

	Are you a first-generation college student?								
	Yes			No			Total		
	Mean	*N*	Standard deviation	Mean	*N*	Standard deviation	Mean	*N*	Standard deviation
Public speaking confidence (before)	0.7632	38	0.43085	0.8333	18	0.38348	0.7857	56	0.41404
Public speaking confidence (after)	0.9737	38	0.16222	0.9444	18	0.23570	0.9643	56	0.18726

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Table 3. First-generation students perspectives on the improvement of interpersonal skills

Student perspectives upon completion of MUN course	Verbal communication	Academic skills	Leadership development
Before this course, I was timid and would be terrified to speak in class or even to another person. The way the course was designed helped me highly to overcome many of my fears of public speaking. I can strongly agree that after the course, I became more confident to be an advocate for myself. As I look back, I can definitely attest that I have taken many of my current skills that I hold in my current position from the Model UN course that I took years ago.	√		√
Public speaking, research, and organization. As an intervention teacher, I help host school assemblies to about 240 children and I feel the skills learned during Model UN helped me.	√	√	
Some skills that strengthened after the Model UN experience that has been very helpful to my life today are research and public speaking. When it comes to public speaking, it has strengthened because now I know that if I am well prepared on a topic before a class discussion, I would be able to talk about it.	√	√	
I believe my research skills and qualitative analysis skills noticeably improved. My technical writing skills (the ability to write critically and concisely) significantly improved.		√	
Socializing and formal speaking have been the two skill sets that have been the most useful in real life. When applied to school, being able to know how to research has been the most helpful. And although my writing skills were strengthened slightly, it still helps both in school and in my life today.	√		√
Model UN helped strengthen my confidence, my public speaking skills, and my leadership abilities. Following MUN, I stepped into bigger leadership roles on campus and in my community.	√		√
MUN helped me to be more outspoken and much more involved in world politics and global issues we are facing today. Definitely looking into how I can become more involved.	√		√
Leadership, delegating tasks, problem solving, and persuasion.		√	√
My writing skills and confidence improved as I learned to think more outside the box and to not be afraid to put the time in to hard work. I became more patient with research and my learning overall improved.		√	
I find that I continue to utilize a number of skill sets developed and refined during my time in Model UN. The most prevalent being able to speak effectively with others who may not have the same point of view as mine. I am able to better listen to others' concerns and address them respectfully and directly. I currently work in an environment where effective communication is vital to our work and I often find myself speaking with others who are upset, uncomfortable, or just need someone to listen to. I draw from my time in Model UN to be a greater communicator.	√		√

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and leadership skills) improved upon completion of the MUN course. Student responses indicate that first-generation college students benefited from the opportunities the MUN course provided to practice effective verbal and academic skills, and leadership skills.

Two student participant responses are highlighted to demonstrate how much the MUN course positively impacted these students' interpersonal skills. The first is from a male first-generation college student participant who took this course on two separate occasions, in 2012 and in 2013, and later went on to receive a doctorate.

> I felt extremely prepared for what was to come. As a result of the experiences and preparation that took place during the class setting, I felt I was extremely prepared for everything and anything that could happen and/or develop during the conference. I became very invested and such *[sic]* took my role very seriously as a delegate of my assigned countries. When in NY, I was ready to be an effective delegate and represent my assigned country confidently.

The second example is from a female first-generation college student-participant who completed the course in 2013.

> I find that I continue to utilize a number of skill sets developed and refined during my time in Model UN. The most prevalent being able to speak effectively with others who may not have the same point of view as me. I am able to better listen to others concerns and address them respectfully and directly. I currently work in an environment where effective communication is vital to our work and I often find myself speaking with others who are upset, uncomfortable, or just need someone to listen to. I draw from my time in Model UN to be a greater communicator.

These comments are representative of the responses from former MUN participants. They also capture the core values that result from participating in simulations: (1) improving students' ability to verbally communicate with confidence, and identifying and relating to one's target audience, (2) improving leadership skills of negotiation, teambuilding, collaborative decision-making, and active-listening, and (3) improving students' academic skills that encompass multiple skills related to research, writing, organization, and time management.

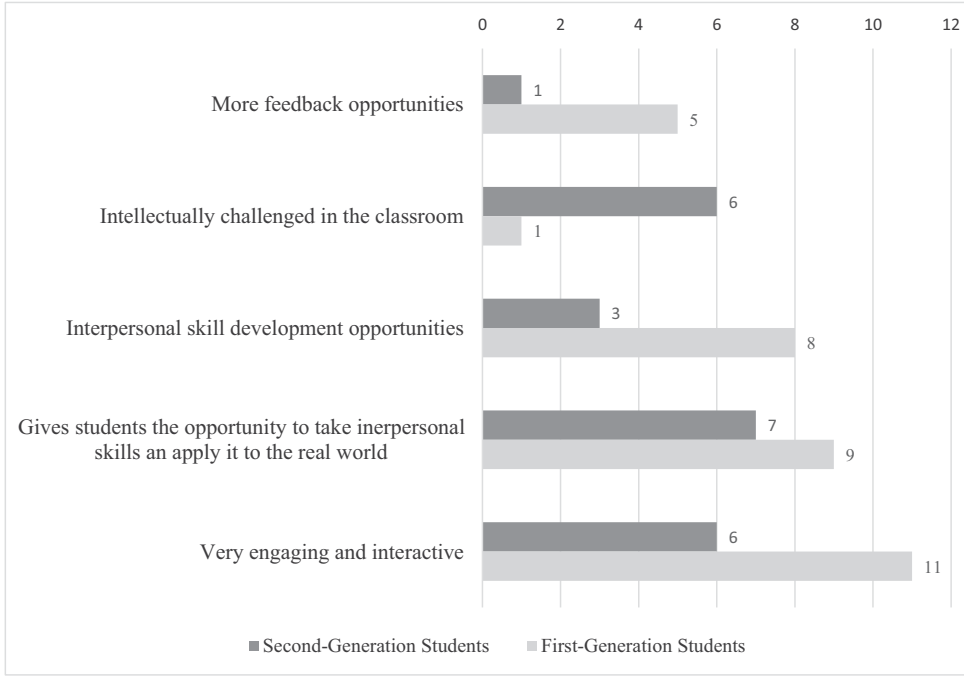
As table 3 shows, these experiences support findings from scholars who emphasize that student involvement in campus activities contribute to first-generation students' cultural capital (Feldman and Newcomb 1969; Pascarella et al. 2004). The friendships forged in this class contributed to first-generation college students becoming more aware of events on campus.

To capture to what degree the MUN class was a unique experience for students, table 4 identified key phrases found in first-generation and second-generation college student responses to determine how the MUN course compared to their other courses. The responses from this open-ended question demonstrate that first-generation college students felt the active learning component offered them more feedback from the professor and more opportunities to develop their interpersonal skills than most other undergraduate courses offered at the institution.

One surprising result was that first-generation college students were less likely to report that they found that they were intellectually challenged in the classroom. Two initial observations were made. First, second-generation college students may have found the course more challenging than first-generation college students because they were more familiar with teacher-centered learning than student-centered

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Table 4. First and second-generation students' perspectives on MUN course



learning. As a result, second-generation college students may have felt more pressure to remain vigilant to meet course expectations. Second, these different responses may relate back to the idea of "cultural capital" as noted by Collier and Morgan (2008). Variations in cultural capital may explain how each student group interpreted the question. Second-generation college students' responses may be based on the rigorous research and writing component of the course, while first-generation college students' responses may interpret this question to the overall pressure felt in the course. However, given the small class size and more intimate nature of faculty–student dynamic, it is possible that first-generation students did not feel as if they were struggling with the course material. Nevertheless, the major takeaway from table 4 is how first-generation college students positively reacted to the MUN courses' active learning despite the effort required by students to participate in class simulations.

As mentioned by previous scholars who attempted to address how active learning benefits college students, this section made a clear finding that active learning within a classroom setting greatly benefits first-generation students. Comparisons between first-generation and second-generation college students also show that the active learning course benefited both students overall. As shown in table 3, first-generation students have experienced and improved interpersonal skills after completing the course. In short, previous research has failed to address whether active learning and, more specifically, simulations actually improve first- generation students' interpersonal skills. Lastly, table 4 illustrates both first-generation and second-generation student's feedback on how a course that employed active learning through simulations is useful and beneficial to their academic success and life outside the classroom. These findings contribute to the literature and help fill the gap that support the claim that more active learning courses offered in

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a university setting can promote student success, particularly for first-generation students.

While this study did not conclusively prove that simulations taught in an active learning environment directly promote interpersonal skill set development for first-generation college students, our findings support that generally speaking, students' skills did improve. Additionally, one thing that resonates for many of these former MUN participants is that this particular course left a lasting impression on them, and for some, was the highlight of their college experience. The final survey question "Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the Model United Nations program?" revealed that students found the MUN course a "transformative," "unforgettable," and "life changing" experience that contributed to building self-confidence and strengthening academic and verbal skills. Some also expressed confidence in leadership skills.

Research Limitations

While we readily acknowledge that our article has limitations, we understand the benefits of highlighting them. First is the small sample size. Likewise, since the study only applies to one campus, our method does not allow us to make a generalized claim that active learning through simulations is enough to impact first-generation college students' interpersonal skills significantly. We faced a limited response from the student participants. This, in return, limited our results and provided us with highly skewed answers. We recoded the ordinal scaled variable into a dichotomous variable to address this since the low response rate did not provide an extensive range of responses. As shown in table 2, we demonstrated how impactful active learning through simulations can improve both first-generation and second-generation students' public speaking confidence.

Second, due to the descriptive and exploratory nature of this study, it is difficult to draw any causal conclusions. However, our method allows us to determine the extent to which stimulations are enough to impact one's interpersonal skills after completing the MUN course. It is useful to know to what degree simulations can positively impact first-generation students and to what extent these effects may persist even after completing the course. Future studies may want to develop a more long-term survey that could track specific interpersonal skill sets and expand the type of interpersonal skills such as team building and collaboration.

While our study found that MUN students were able to forge tighter bonds with their peers due to the collaborative learning environment, these findings may be unique to this campus and not necessarily be evidenced if studied on another campus. The social cohesion of the MUN students could indicate the large number of first-generation college students or it could reflect the number of minority students enrolled in the course. Future studies may wish to explore how peer learning and collaborative assignments specifically contribute to stronger social bonds and networks for college students.

Scholars will naturally want to understand how implementing a more institution-driven approach of incorporating more active learning techniques in the classroom will impact first-generation students' interpersonal skills. Although our method is not suited for answering that question directly, our primary approach is practical to gain the first step to understanding the connection between active learning and interpersonal skill set development. For all these reasons, this study is here to document the existence of an effect between active learning and improved interpersonal skills. As shown in table 4, student's feedback about the MUN course showed that first-generation students largely reacted positively to the course's active learning component and felt that their interpersonal skills were developed more in this class than any other course offered at the institution.

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Discussion and Conclusion

Previous work has shown that first-generation college students benefit more from educational practices that involve them in activities such as class presentations or participation in class discussions with faculty (Filkins and Doyle 2002). Synthesizing these results with the study conducted in this article, we understand that having a course that practices active learning through stimulations can strengthen both first-generation and second-generation college students' verbal communication skills. We also find that from the first-hand perspective of first-generation and second-generation college students, we can provide a new understanding of the benefit an active learning course that practices simulations has on strengthening students' academic skills and leadership development.

We suspect that our findings would not surprise scholars who recognize that when simulations are properly designed, they can encourage active learning when students interact and learn to collaborate with one another (McIntosh 2001; Sasley 2010; Leib and Ruppel 2020). Our findings fortify the literature on simulations and encourage educators to reflect on their methods and learning outcomes and how simulations can achieve those outcomes. And yet our results point to significant gaps in current theoretical models measuring simulations' impact on interpersonal skill development of first-generation college students. Moreover, our results build upon current literature by focusing on the first-generation aspect and highlighting the benefits of simulations in active learning classrooms to strengthen interpersonal skills.

Despite these research limitations, this article clarifies MUN simulations' critical role in developing interpersonal skills among first-generation college students and second-generation college students. Granted that the MUN course and the culminating NMUN conference in New York are one way students can enhance the skills developed in the classroom, there are several alternatives to this national conference. Additionally, as several universities around the world transitioned to remote instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there are virtual conferences such as the ICON Project or the Council of Foreign Relations Model Diplomacy that offer students the same experience as a face-to-face conference while allowing instructors the flexibility to retain simulations in the classroom. Lastly, while this article focuses on one particular simulation, this course's framework can be applied to any active-learning classroom across university campuses that has begun employing this approach to disciplines such as the social sciences, humanities, and applied sciences.

Our study sought to determine whether simulations used within an active learning environment contributed to developing interpersonal skills, particularly among first-generation college students. Based on our findings of this one-campus study, the MUN course contributed to developing interpersonal skills, not only for first-generation college students, but also for second-generation college students. Furthermore, our findings suggest that active learning contributes to building on first-generation college students' cultural capital and that students continue to utilize and build on these interpersonal skills in the workforce. While our method restricts making broad generalizations, our findings reaffirm how simulations can help promote deeper learning when adequately built into the course and taught using an active learning approach. In addition, simulations can also help first-generation college students by creating a more conducive environment for collaboration, where all students can work toward improving their interpersonal skills. It goes without saying that courses that utilize active learning provide a more flexible atmosphere where peer learning and faculty feedback opportunities are more prevalent. More importantly, we found evidence that as first-generation students become more exposed to active learning through simulations, their self-confidence improves, as does their verbal communication skills.

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Of course, we also leave a few unanswered questions. As discussed previously, this is a one campus study with a focus on a single course offered once a year. Therefore, we did not attempt to compare our first-generation student data with that of the institution. However, future research could adapt this study to their course of interest and apply this logic to determine whether active learning through simulations is particularly effective in improving first-generation students' interpersonal skills such as verbal communication, academic skills, and leadership development. The method cannot explicitly say that first-generation student enrollment in a single course will improve their interpersonal skills. However, it can assess students' verbal communication, academic skills, or leadership development skills. Future studies with a larger sample size would allow the possibility of a conclusion that active learning through simulations is enough to improve first-generation students' interpersonal skills positively.

Lastly, our findings serve to bridge the gap in the academic literature to determine how simulations taught in an active learning environment contribute to first-generation college students' successful transition in college and the development of interpersonal skills beneficial in the workforce.

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