

Diversity in Academe

The Gender Issue

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Diversity in Academe 2013

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First-Generation Students Need Help in Straddling Their 2 Cultures

By *Teresa Heinz Housel*

It has been nearly 20 years since I realized a long-held dream and traveled to London to study abroad.

As the first person in my family to attend college, I had never been on a plane before, and had to work four jobs to pay for the trip. Just before my departure I attended a dinner held by the professor who would be leading the program. When I told the other Oberlin College students at the dinner that I was looking forward to my first plane trip, they responded with good-natured chuckles and puzzlement that I would so publicly announce my lack of travel experience.



The Gender Issue Highlights

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Since that dinner, I have lived in four countries and traveled in more than 30 others. Most recently I was a visiting scholar in journalism and communication at Massey University, set amid the green hills surrounding Wellington, New Zealand. This native of rural northeastern Ohio had indeed traveled a long way since

childhood, when I would spend hours looking at maps and dreaming of places I would someday go. Despite having no one in my immediate family to guide me, I still somehow knew that education was the only way I'd ever reach those goals.

My path through higher education, first as a student and later as a faculty member, has been both delightful and complicated.

Oberlin certainly had first-generation students in 1990, but it felt as if there were very few of us because social class was generally not discussed in classrooms or among peers. Some of us tried to mask our working-class backgrounds by attempting to blend in with wealthier classmates. Fortunately, the early 1990s marked the height of grunge, so it was easy to purchase cheap faded cords and button-down shirts at the nearby secondhand store to match the unofficial campus dress code.

By 2011, nearly one in five freshmen at four-year American colleges was a first-generation student, according to statistics from the University of California at Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute.

Colleges today are working to better meet the academic, social, and professional challenges of educating first-generation students. Studies show that such students often have poorer reading, writing, and oral-communication skills than do the children of college graduates, leading to lower retention rates. Such students are also more likely to work and less likely to have parental guidance in their academic and career activities.

There is another gap, however, that receives less attention but that touches the lives of many first-generation students daily, especially at more-elite colleges. It has to do with the acquisition of "cultural capital."

If anything, cultural isolation can increase up the career trajectory.

First-generation students often straddle the typically working-class home culture and the middle- and upper-class academic culture. I found it maddening to learn the cultural

capital of academe, where rules were so often unspoken. The stress of managing two cultures was especially frustrating during my early college days, when I met classmates who took for granted an upbringing that often included family vacations abroad, museum and symphony visits, music camps, and familiarity with international cuisines. At once fascinated and intimidated, I met accepting friends who introduced me to Indian food (among others), independent films, art, and different religious philosophies. They respected me for forging an uncharted path on my own.

The lowest points of my cultural transition still sadden me. Early in my first semester, I received a low exam mark and did not know how to approach the professor for help. I made it to her office door before turning back. Although I was intelligent enough to be at a rigorous college, I still wondered during that first semester if I really belonged there.

Despite such struggles, I sometimes forgot that my family was not on this adventure with me. My father (who worked on the assembly line and later as a custodian at Goodyear Tire in Akron) and I argued during visits about whether I was acting "too good" for them. Indeed, many first-generation students speak of the fear of appearing too haughty if they reveal their college-learned knowledge through vocabulary, conversation topics, dress, or even how they carry themselves with newfound confidence.

I sometimes spent school breaks on the campus to avoid the anxiety of negotiating two different cultures. It was easier to read magazines in a near-empty campus dormitory than to go home.

But some things I couldn't avoid. Before each new semester, Oberlin students received cards with their class schedules. A blank orange card meant that the student's account was on hold until the outstanding tuition balance was settled.

When I visited Oberlin this year to speak about my two recent co-edited volumes of research on first-generation students, dread washed over me all over again as I walked around the office formerly occupied by the bursar. Early at Oberlin, I had felt the

stigma of receiving an orange card. I assumed that my father had been paying the tuition bill in monthly installments. When I questioned him, he explained that he assumed he could pay the balance after graduation.

During the next three years, I worried about receiving more orange cards as I balanced academics with extracurricular activities, a campus job, and internships. I helped my father pay the tuition by withdrawing cash from my credit card. After my parents divorced, my mother was never able to contribute financially, but offered moral support.

My 40-something self now understands that my parents were doing the best they could with what they had. I saw that clearly recently, when my husband asked my grandfather if he had ever encouraged my father to think about college. My grandfather's baffled response indicated that college was not an option for his working-class son, whose choices in the mid-1960s were to enter the military or find a well-paying factory job.

After my father died, in 2005, he left behind piles of books, magazines, and newspapers in his home. Perhaps today, with high-school guidance counseling and financial-aid assistance, he might well have pursued college.

After I accepted a faculty position, I wrongfully assumed that the old cultural demons would be gone. If anything, cultural isolation can increase up the career trajectory. Dinner parties, intellectual competition, and expectation of education as a right rather than a privilege underscore academic values.

First-generation students' transition to college can be challenging because cultural mores are often unspoken. However, there are important ways in which colleges can help us navigate academe. For example, Harvard University recently established a fund to help such students pay for incidental expenses for social activities, clothes, and travel home. Colleges that cannot afford such a fund could establish focused initiatives within existing offices.

For instance, the career-development office could host a mock

dinner in which students could be instructed on formal etiquette required for job interviews held over meals. Campus diversity or student-support offices could assign peer mentors to incoming first-generation students. When I was a college student, I was reluctant to further identify myself as a first-generation student and did not take advantage of Oberlin's student-support services. I would have been more likely to accept assistance from a peer.

Other low-cost efforts could involve residential-life programs and even course assignments. When I taught a First Year Seminar at Hope College, in 2009, I required students to attend campus plays and arranged a class field trip to a Chicago museum. These activities did not specifically focus on first-generation students, but the assignments exposed them to wider cultural experiences.

Academic departments can also reach first-generation students through smaller events. For example, they could host movie nights and invite students to discuss the film afterward in an informal setting with professors. This type of activity can help lessen the feeling of intimidation that some first-generation students feel around professors.

Of course, the specific difficulties experienced by first-generation students differ depending on whether they are attending a community college, a private liberal-arts college, or a large university.

I have slowly found other first-generation colleagues at my institution and others. Our conversations helped me realize that the biggest lie we have faced is that we do not belong in academic culture.

Academe needs our voices.

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