

[Navigating new territory](#)

First-generation college students find their way in uncharted waters

Dennis R.J. Geppert/The Holland Sentinel

Hope sophomore Melissa Winegar helps Valeria with her homework at the Upward Bound program at Dimnent Memorial Chapel Wednesday afternoon. Upward Bound is a program designed to help student get into college.

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Holland, MI —

Despite rigorous college prep work, Hope College senior Juan Martinez hit some bumpy patches of road when he started college.

Martinez — for whom English is a secondary language — was surprised by professors' critiques of his limited vocabulary in writing term papers. His parents were his two biggest cheerleaders, but without college experience themselves, they couldn't offer much advice.

The unwritten ground rules of academia — like writing essays laden with showy words — often penalize first-generation students like Martinez. Teresa Heinz Housel, assistant professor in the Hope College Department of Communication, recently examined their plight in "The Invisibility Factor: Administrators and Faculty Reach Out to First-Generation College Students."

Nearly one out of six freshmen at American four-year institutions are first-generation students. And they are in good company: Hillary and Bill Clinton and Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor were each first-generation college students.

"I think that first-generation students are really an invisible minority group," Housel said.

"They're really too shy to speak in the class, because they don't think that they have anything to add. They are less likely to approach their professors, because it's intimidating."

Not only are first-generation students naive about college's unwritten rules, their financial and social problems often go unnoticed by college officials, Housel said.

Professors fail to see first-generation students by calling class in coffeeshops with \$4 coffee.

Elite colleges give scholarships to first-generation students, but miss the fact that some won't have the money to attend campus community functions like school dances, keeping them on the outskirts.

The same institutions that intentionally create racially and culturally diverse classrooms ignore the social class of students' families, Housel said.

The Invisibility Factor, released Jan. 15, is the first of two volumes of essays about first-generation students edited by Housel and Vickie Harvey, an associate professor of

communication studies at California State University.

Classroom dynamics

Kenneth Oldfield, a professor of public administration and former first-generation college student, describes an awkward moment during his college days.

“(Oldfield) was upset when he witnessed this really heated argument about ideas, and he just expected them to take it out into the hall for a fist fight,” Housel said.

Some students who don’t understand the give and take of ideas between professors timidly shrink into the background.

But others challenge and regularly try to debate professors in the classroom, as one essayist in the book describes.

“She realized that that wasn’t personal, that was just their way of communicating with authority figures,” Housel said.

Environment change

Uncertain of what their child may face in this unfamiliar campus environment, many parents find it hard to let their children leave the home.

“That is a new thing both for the student and the parent who has never gone to college,” said Liz Colburn, director of Upward Bound, a program that tries to prepare at-risk students for the college experience.

Housel said that successful first-generation students feel like they are straddling two worlds — the college world, and the world of their parents.

Ed Sosa, a former first-generation student, and now an administrator at Grand Rapids Community College, remembers leaving home for a few weeks during the summer for an Upward Bound summer camp at Hope College. His mother sat on the end of his bed watching him pack his clothes, even though Hope was a short drive away from West Ottawa High School. “I was only moving downtown, but for my mother, my father and me, that was a major trip,” Sosa said.

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