

First Generation Focus

Colleges need to focus on students whose parents never earned a degree, writes Teresa Heinz Housel.

By

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March 23, 2012

First generation college students (or FGS) comprise a student population that is routinely overlooked at American colleges and universities. These students, whose parents have attained neither a bachelor's nor an associate degree, are more likely to encounter academic, financial, professional, cultural and emotional difficulties than are students whose parents attended college. However, at a time when budget space is at a premium, many colleges and universities do not have campus programs to help first generation students matriculate. This could be problematic for student recruitment and retention at the nation's college and universities. Years ago, one could learn a trade, make enough to support a family, and even comfortably retire. Not today. Even specific trades require additional education. Today's graduates also report that a college degree does not necessarily guarantee an interview during the current economic recession, when well-qualified and older workers are unemployed and seeking entry-level positions.

However, a college degree is increasingly necessary for an initial interview. As a result of these circumstances, first generation students are increasing at the nation's colleges and universities. Nearly one in six freshmen at American four-year institutions are first generation, according to a 2007 study by the University of California at Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute. The topic of first generation college students is often linked to race, ethnicity and affirmative action on many campuses. Programs that assist such students are frequently housed in multicultural or diversity education offices because minority students are also commonly first generation. A 2005 study by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 36 percent of minority students are also first generation. Certainly, research indicates that FGS usually have to traverse additional cultural boundaries such as race and ethnicity, as well as class, when they enter predominantly white institutions.

Some might argue that race and ethnicity matter in a way that economic status does not. Education researchers assert that race, ethnicity, and class are all important, but do not always impact students' college experiences in the same ways. One recent study found that minority and first generation students have somewhat different challenges. FGS are less involved in fine arts activities, science/quantitative experiences, course learning, and engage less with students who are different from them, but they have greater academic learning gains than minority students.

Given these and other findings, educators must recognize what factors can be attributed to first generation status and/or race/ethnicity, and then target those students' specific needs. FGS

programs could address targeted areas in existing campus initiatives to save costs. For example, orientation workshops could teach first generation students how to effectively take notes and participate in class, just to name a few academic skills. Residential programs and even class assignments could encourage minority students' learning and involvement with campus activities. I tried this latter possibility in my first-year seminar course at Hope College a few years ago, when I required students to attend campus events and discuss how such events could affect their overall college learning.

Regardless of whether first generation students are racial or ethnic minority students or not, studies show that FGS often lack reading, writing and oral communication skills at the levels of the children of college graduates, which frequently lead to poor retention rates. I was a strong high school student, and even was class valedictorian, but soon after I arrived at Oberlin College I realized that my preparation for college-level work lagged that of my classmates. I learned in high school to study for memorization rather than for analysis. I learned study and time management skills through Oberlin's Student Support Services (now Student Academic Services). After a semester of hard work, I caught up and later progressed toward graduate studies.

First generation students struggle with more than just academics. With the burden of outside work hours and less parental involvement, such students take part in fewer extracurricular organizations, campus cultural programs, internships, and career networking activities than their peers from middle- and upper-class economic backgrounds. If FGS participate in extracurricular activities, they often delay their involvement until they feel they have their studies under control. Although the hurdles may seem insurmountable, FGS must use campus resources to build social and professional connections.

Campus involvement was not an issue for me because I enjoy helping to make decisions that impact my community. I quickly joined Oberlin's campus newspaper staff and other organizations. Research has shown that social networks are crucial for academic success. Campus involvements helped me better acclimate to campus culture by giving me a sense of belonging and thus a stronger desire to succeed academically.

Although I quickly found a niche in campus organizations, internship searches and other aspects of professional development were foreign terrains. Non-FGS may be able to consult their parents for assistance with making professional contacts and preparing for interviews. First generation students often do not have an immediate role model for such activities and have to look outward for such support. Because my parents had factory or service jobs, I did not understand the process of applying for a white-collar position. Thankfully, Oberlin's career office provided excellence assistance in job search strategies, résumé and cover letter writing, and interview preparation.

Adding to the academic, social, and professional challenges that FGS face, these students typically straddle home and school class cultures. The home culture is typically working-class, whereas the academic culture is traditionally middle and upper class. When I was at Oberlin and even long afterward in graduate school, visits home were very stressful because I had to abruptly leave my growing middle-class identity on campus and jump into a working-class one. I sometimes spent school breaks on campus because I did not wish to experience the anxiety of

straddling two class cultures.

The stress of managing two class cultures was especially acute during my early college days. I compare my immersion into campus culture to being dropped into a foreign country without a map. To navigate unfamiliar territory, I required certain types of cultural capital that needed to be learned. It would be erroneous to argue that either the working- or middle-/upper-middle class milieu lacks cultural capital. Rather, each social class has its own cultural capital that someone must know in order to function well within that class. Difficulties occur when someone lacks the cultural capital necessary for successful self-management within an unfamiliar social class.

My college experiences were a lesson in acquisition of cultural capital. As a first generation college student in the early 1990s, I was not prepared for the culture shock that I would experience at Oberlin. I thrived in Oberlin's academic environment, where I befriended other students who were curious about the world, politically- and social justice-minded, and enjoyed learning. However, the campus' cultural class aspect was initially more challenging because many classmates came with previous assumed experiences that would have been unthinkable in my working-class upbringing. I learned a new cultural grammar for relating to others and just being: What conversational topics were appropriate for dinners with professors, how to make an airline reservation, what outfits were appropriate for professional interviews, and many other aspects of this new middle-class life. Most of these cultural rules were unspoken, making the puzzle of learning them even more maddening.

Many of my Oberlin classmates, professors, and staff were welcoming and eager to help, but I especially experienced class disparities while studying abroad. During the spring of 1993, I planned to study abroad through an Oberlin program in London. I worked five jobs during the summer of 1992 just to save for the travel. For many peers, this was not their first trip abroad. I was dumbfounded to discover that some of my friends' families even swapped houses with people in other countries or rented cottages abroad. My classmates had an assumed cultural capital of fluency in European languages, travel experiences, and knowledge of art and theater. These would be unthinkable luxuries in my working class upbringing in which vacations, let alone plane trips, were rare. I bonded with several other working-class students enrolled in the London program, and together we stumbled through American and British middle-class culture. The cultural challenges that first generation students face are real, but they can be the most difficult for institutions to identify because they typically result from unspoken cultural expectations. The baseline of knowledge between first-generation students and upper-middle class students is sometimes vastly different. FGS typically lack certain types of cultural capital, such as exposure to cultural arts that wealthier students might take for granted. And first generation students are often employed for more hours and commute rather than live on campus, which make it even more difficult for them to engage in the campus cultural activities that would acculturate them.

To compound these difficulties, the cultural straddling between school and home is often colored by shame and guilt.

I used to feel guilty about leaving my family behind and ashamed of my working-class origins as I worked and traveled all over the world. Other working-class academics speak about having this "survivor's guilt" even though they logically know their family is proud of their accomplishments. It took me a few years to learn how to gratefully receive opportunities so that I could as a teacher help others realize their goals through education.

My former shame is now similarly replaced by thankfulness. I am grateful for the diverse class experiences that have given me the bilingual-type ability to fluently speak in different class languages. Cultural straddling helps me relate to people from highly varying class backgrounds

and different ways of thinking. As I share my class experiences in the classroom, I find that my self-disclosures give my first-generation and/or working-class students the courage to also speak. I always tell these students that the same skills that enabled them to attend college will help them make their way in the world. After all, we are survivors.

Certainly, institutions can assist FGS by recognizing how contextual factors such as class impact academic performance and cultural transition into college. At a time when every student matters, retention of first-generation college students should be a top priority for colleges and universities. I urge colleges that have no programs to support first generation students to start small and dedicate resources toward specifically helping these students. This can be anything from helping these students navigate study abroad opportunities, extra help in explaining financial aid options and, of course, a bit of hand-holding when it comes to different cultural events.

Researchers have found that even existing programs such as first-year experience courses can be fine-tuned to benefit first generation students. A focus on helping such students graduate not only can strengthen a college or university's bottom line, but also enables more FGS to create stories of success.

Bio

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