Cultural Capital and First-Generation College Students

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Abstract

This paper builds upon various findings regarding first-generation college students and the notion of cultural capital. Also discussed are methods that professionals within higher education are beginning to implement in order to better serve this historically disadvantaged and marginalized population. First-generation college students are typically defined as students “with neither parent having completed a four-year college degree in the USA by the time that the student [has] entered college” (Collier & Morgan, 2007). In recent years, the definition has expanded some, coming to account for varied levels of parental education, which will also be discussed in greater detail.

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Concerns continue to manifest with respect to first-generation college students (also referred to as first-gen students, first-gens, and FGCSs). Statistics suggest that first-gen populations are increasing in university systems nationwide; however, trends also suggest that first-gen populations diminish greatly at different schools, primarily during their first year at university, for a myriad of reasons. Traditionally underrepresented and underserved, first-generation students, based on research gathered from numerous sources, originate from working-class and minority populations, factors that contribute to a lack of what scholars have coined “cultural capital;” a greater awareness of the university system, its cultural values, as well as the intellectual prowess and financial ability necessary to function independently as a university-level student.

Building off of personal research conducted earlier in the academic year on first-generation students, my aim is to explore, in greater detail, the notion of cultural capital as it relates to the struggles that first-gen populations will face. The topic is of great significance to me, as I, along with several of my close friends identify as belonging with this particular population. Having struggled to maintain a high degree of success throughout my undergraduate career, it is personally enlightening to explore issues with which I have wrestled and overcome.

In conclusion, I will briefly address two theories which relate to this topic, as well as establish ways in which higher education is changing to better serve and aid first-gen students throughout their academic careers.

**First-Generation Defined**

In order to develop sufficient understanding of first-generation college students, a functional definition must first be established with respect to this particular population. Evidence
of knowledge with respect to the needs of first-generation populations can be traced back to the 1960’s (McMurray and Sorrels, 2009, p. 210). With the creation of federally funded social programs, such as TRiO programs and Upward Bound, it was established that universities and the U.S. government had knowledge of populations that struggled with access to higher education (including first-generation students) (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009, p. 210). Adachi is the researcher associated with the coining of “first-generation” as a label, sometime near 1982, signifying that research focused on first-generation populations failed to truly manifest until that point in time (Payne, 2007). The label, according to Payne (2007), established that a first-generation college student was an individual whose parents did not complete a university-level degree.

Expanding on the aforementioned definition ever so slightly, the American Government’s Educational Opportunities Program, according to Collier & Morgan (2007), reports that first-generation college students are individuals “with neither parent having completed a four-year college degree in the USA by the time that the student [has] entered college.” This has since become the more commonly accepted definition associated with first-generation college students, focusing on completion of a degree at a four-year institution; however, in recent years, the government’s definition and Adachi’s original concept have been added to or adjusted by educational researchers. Ishitani (2006), a professor at the University of Memphis, crafts his own definition of “first-generation college student,” expanding it by establishing two separate groups of students with differing levels parental experience. Of the two groups, the first is comprised of “students with parents whose highest educational attainment was either a high school diploma or less” (Ishitani, 2006). This first group falls in line with, but may be slightly different from the American government’s understanding of first-gen status (one assumes that a
first-gen student’s parents failed to enter college and only completed high school). The second group is comprised of “students with at least one of their parents having attended college but never attaining a bachelor’s degree” (Ishitani, 2006).

What with research on this topic beginning in the early 1980’s, very little in terms of the historical origins of this broad group exists, though common trends have emerged since the inception of the “first-gen” status within scholarly literature. Based on evidence from multiple reports, first-gen students from any particular cultural or racial group have been “less likely to graduate then peers who have at least one parent with a college education” (Collier and Morgan, 2007). Both Ishitani (2006) and Payne (2007) note that first-gen students tend to originate from poor or working-class families, a factor which, in addition to course-related struggles, has greatly influenced student decisions to leave or remain in a university setting. Payne (2007) also notes that, more often than not, first-gen students have originated from minority groups, though that hasn’t excludes first-gen students from majority populations (including White groups).

One of the struggles with respect to discussing first-generation college students involves establishing commonalities with respect to psychological and personal development. Regardless from which area or group different first-gen student populations originate, or ways in which individuals are socially reared, historical trends suggest that first-gens are more apt to experience difficulties at a college or university, marking them as high-risk with respect to academic performance, as well as retention.

**Contemporary Issues**

Based on a review of various pieces of literature and scholarly articles, one concludes that academic concerns are one of the primarily issues facing first-gens due to a lack of critical awareness with respect to faculty expectations and even less understanding of college-level
academics. Adding clarity to assertion, Collier & Morgan (2007), faculty at Portland State University, establish that first-gen students desire from their professors “even more detail than their more traditional counterparts.” In short, first-gen students cannot accomplish or “do their best work unless their professors [are] specific about how work should be done, including the ‘formats for papers,’” as well as “‘knowing whether they liked [papers] single spaced or double spaced.’” (Collier & Morgan, 2007). Smaller details such as these, as well as the ability to infer what a faculty member desires with respect to projects or assignments remain challenging and at times absent in the minds of many first-gen students.

Also in terms of academic performance, Payne (2007) notes that standardized test scores, as well as high school GPAs, tend to be lower for first-gen individuals, resulting in “remedial assistance in mathematics and reading to get them to college-level work in these areas.” Additionally, Collier and Morgan (2007) note that many first-gen students feel ill-prepared and inadequate when addressing course-related responsibilities. Time management also appears to be one of many issues that hinder the ability of first-generation students to effectively function as student; however, the label “time management” is simply a cover for a much larger issue. There is a “give-and-take” relationship with which many first-gen students struggle in relation to the academics. Activities that seemingly distance FGCSs from the academic community and their studies include part- to full-time employment (typically off-campus), obligations to one’s home and household, relationships, as well as tutoring efforts in order to get “caught up” in other courses. Socioeconomic status also appears to be directly correlated to one’s ability to manage time, as many first-gen students will need to secure employment in order to cover the costs of attending a college or university. The “need to value paid work over school,” Snell (2008) notes, will often drive these individuals to abandon their studies in favor of securing stable income.
Payne (2007) confirms these findings, adding that the need for income, which will help fund one’s education, might also support one’s home.

Payne (2007) discusses a sense of guilt that emerges with respect to this phenomenon, as their already financially unstable families will contribute to the student’s college education. This in turn prompts some students to work as a way of “paying back” their family members. As a result of this need for work versus academic demands, income levels, according to this research, have a strong correlation with literacy and reading rates (Snell, 2008). This claim holds some merit, as one’s detachment from studies or certain academic pursuits would limit the formation of knowledge or development of specific skills.

Yet another issue arises with respect to one’s socioeconomic status, which, in addition to the previously discussed elements, contributes to the greater concept of cultural capital. This particular element involves the application process for financial aid. As Payne (2007) notes, “the [FAFSA] application itself is quite complex and requires extensive income and tax data and other personal information from both the student and the parents.” Taking into account other technological factors, such as home internet and other “givens” for the majority population, Oldfield (2007) comments that socioeconomic status is often discussed in classrooms in some “abstract” way, and faculty fail to clearly elaborate on the “considerable advantages that that the offspring of parents who hold college degrees possess.” The monetary as well as cultural and academic aptitude-centered advantages, which constitute “cultural capital,” refer to “the knowledge, skills, education and other advantages that a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which one can succeed” (Oldfield, 2007). Because of this cultural capital” (or lack thereof), first-generation students experience social and academic isolation when observed in relation to their affluent, more “culturally in-tune” peers,
who possess the “access” necessary to succeed in the highly competitive, individualistic culture promoted on campus.

The established culture of the institution (regardless of its classification as private, public, vocational, four-year or two-year) is seemingly marketed to and benefits those that are familiar with and more adequately prepared to work independently in such a setting (application for scholarships, technological competency, etc.). Collier & Morgan (2007) further validate this claim while noting the regular practice of campus populations to (consciously or unconsciously) “reproduce,” or sustain the “advantage” among traditional students and faculty, a philosophical mindset that ultimately fails to affirm the needs of first-gen students, thereby marginalizing this population. The perceived division that occurs between first-gen students and their peers, professors, and advisors renders many of the services (and the greater campus community) as something that is seemingly unbeneficial and ultimately enemy to these individuals. Payne (2007) adds to this by further detailing the difficulties encountered by first-gen students due to a lack of familial support and experience with higher education:

“These students experience a shock of balancing two cultures: the one that exists with the family and friends who have no college experience with the one that students are engrossed in while attending college. The balance of two cultures such as this obviously has the ability to produce great tension.”

Ultimately, the absence of any forms of support that will aid in adjusting or “working one’s way” into the collegiate system creates a dramatic challenge for first-gen individuals.

It’s important to be aware of the cultural shift that occurs, as Payne (2007) highlights, when a first-gen student enters the campus community. A number of assumptions can be made with respect to campus climates, as those who are privileged or sufficiently prepared for the
college experience seem to benefit the most from the experience. Those without such experiences (an upbringing in which one was prepared for the financial, intellectual and academic pursuits that make up the greater college experience) are ultimately left, like others, to fend for themselves. Privilege then continues to perpetuate itself in such a way that those with “access” to knowledge pertaining to the campus, its services and faculty, as well as familial support, leading to more a more stabilized state of being. This population of privilege is seen as the norm for campus communities, or the archetype for typical student behavior. This undoubtedly leads to a feeling of marginalization or ill-preparedness on the part of first-gen students.

Research

Some amount of overlap exists with respect to contemporary issues surrounding first-gen students and research regarding degree completion, as well as specific numbers, with respect to this population. In terms of enrollment, one must take into account the previously mentioned issues and utilize them as a lens through which the following statistics are understood (viewing the aforementioned trends as a cause and the following statistics as “the aftermath” of sorts). But first, one must ask, what percentage of students can be identified as first-gen? Research conducted by Earl in 1987 established that roughly 40 percent of all college students then enrolled in courses were first-gen (no information regarding the type of institution was made available) (Payne, 2007). A more recent study conducted by Choy in 2001 concluded that one in every three students at a four-year institution was a first-generation student, while one out of two students at a community college was first-gen (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009, p. 211). Common trends that have continued to emerge within this particular student population have involved
difficulty with “retention, self-efficacy, grades, student self-perceptions and identity, and aspirations” (McMurray & Sorrells, 2009, p. 211).

While it may appear that first-generation populations do in fact constitute an overwhelmingly large percentage of campus populations, such facts are, unfortunately, misleading. After examining first-generation populations at 19 of the more highly selective institutions of higher education, Oldfield (2007) found that “poor and working-class students are significantly underrepresented” at many of the more refined and prestigious institutions in this country, as over 50% of students admitted to some of these universities come from affluent, educated backgrounds. After reviewing his findings, Oldfield concluded that that first-gen students account for less than 11% of the student population in this study. Though the institutions utilized in this survey are highly selective (some also private), research conducted by Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose adds merit to these findings through a study of 146 American additional educational institutions by establishing that first-gen populations, over the course of time, will only be a tiny proportion of the larger campus community (Oldfield, 2007). This is indeed an odd assertion, what with previous claims that roughly forty percent of all students enrolled in courses at colleges or universities are in fact identified as first-gen.

What remains rather eye- opening are the findings of Ishitani (2006) who reports that more than 72% of admitted first-generation students from families in low-income brackets will likely leave college. Many of these students will leave during or after their first year. Even more startling, only 11.5% of the remaining first-gen students attempting to earn a bachelor’s degree will do so in four years, the “traditional” amount of time that it takes one to complete a degree program (Ishitani, 2006).
It is troubling to learn that a large percentage of first-generation college students struggle in relation to their traditional, non-first gen peers. A review of such findings leads to questioning current institutional practices; however, a number of institutions have begun efforts to work with first-gen populations and help them retain their student status. A review of such efforts, both hypothetical and current, will be discussed later in this piece.

**Theoretical Application**

Student development theory, as well as theories tied to racial identity development, may be of some assistance when understanding how individuals in particular groups develop in relation to their non-first-gen peers; however, a significant challenge emerges, as the greater population that has been labeled as “first-gen” is not comprised of one group (Latino students, for example; rather, it is comprised of multiple groups that might not share particular cultural or developmental experiences). Instead, first-gen students (as a whole) are comprised of many minority groups, and also include individuals from traditional, majority, or white populations. Little in terms of developmental theory exists with respect to first-generation college students, though elements of different theoretical approaches (particularly environmental theories) can be applied to clarify feelings and expectations of this student population.

Though regularly discussed in higher education circles (sometimes too much, it seems), Schlossberg’s theory regarding marginality and mattering is the first of several student development theories that strikes me with respect to this topic. Schlossberg’s own work aimed to examine how the college experience can shape feelings of belonging or isolation. Summarized in the work of Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010), Schlossberg notes “feelings of marginality often occur when individuals take on new roles, especially when they are uncertain about what the new role entails” (p. 31). Marginality, in this case, is the result of
“not fitting in and can lead to self-consciousness, irritability, and depression,” especially for members of non-dominant groups (in this case, first-gen students) (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). In essence, Schlossberg’s work concludes that students often wonder and worry about whether or not they have attained a greater sense of purpose and belonging in the academic communities of which they are a part. Marginality then can be seen, if related to previous findings regarding cultural capital, as one of the driving factors in a first-gen student’s decision to stay or leave the institution.

Schlossberg addresses ways in which students might develop a sense of mattering, which comes through communal efforts (on the part of peers, faculty, and advisors). Four dimensions are examined with respect to mattering: “attention, the feeling that one is noticed; importance, a belief that one is cared about; ego-extension, the feeling that someone else will be proud…or sympathetic…; and dependence, a feeling of being needed” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). Schlossberg adds a fifth dimension, appreciation, which constitutes feeling that “one’s efforts are appreciated by others” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). Ultimately, this theory expands on elements that are critically absent when first-gen students pursue an education. Schlossberg’s work also establishes critical areas in which student affairs professionals and faculty members might aid in assisting non-dominant groups in feeling worthy of participating in the academic community.

One final theory involves validation. The work of Rendón established that “non-traditional students (those from diverse racial/ethnic and cultural backgrounds) were often doubtful of their academic ability,” whereas majority students (though initially hesitant) had few concerns with respect to their academic success (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). Active interventions, which took the form of personal validation, were ultimately necessary “to encourage
nontraditional students to become involved in campus life and to enhance their self-esteem” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). Students who are validated, regardless of status, develop “confidence in their ability to learn,” as well as experience “enhanced feelings of self-worth” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). Validation, in this case, entails affirming the issues with which students are wrestling, and supporting through a process-oriented form of advising and support, instilling within students a sense of appreciation while affirming their presence and needs. These particular theories, which focus on environmental factors, are two ways of understanding issues that affect first-gen students and better aid in supporting and retaining their presence on campus.

**Future Support of First-Gen Students**

In discussing mattering, as well as validation, what can student affairs professionals do to aid first-gen students in their academic and developmental journeys? A number of different campus departments can organize their efforts in crafting a campus climate that is welcoming and intentional in their efforts to support first-gen students. Regarding the recruitment of first-gen students, Oldfield (2007) notes that admissions departments should play a critical role in diversifying the social-class origins of the student body. Considering social class “in admissions could ensure a strong contingent of poor and working class FGCSs in the classroom a critical mass that would help these students feel comfortable on campus and that would improve the quality of the learning environment for all students” (Oldfield, 2007). This appears to be a well-intentioned effort that might drastically combat the sense of isolation felt by many first-gen students. Creating a community that is cognizant of the needs of this student population, as well providing opportunities for more first-gens to participate in the campus community, will no doubt benefit those that are already present on campus.
On a personal note, another area in which university administrators might combat cultural capital to help create a more welcoming and supportive environment involves hiring on first-generation grads. Bringing on faculty members who themselves are first-generation might restructure the academic culture of particular institutions, expanding awareness of first-gen populations within the classroom and allowing additional forms of support to manifest in such settings. In short, mentors or faculty members (who might be first-gen grads themselves) would be valuable resources to current or newly admitted first-gen students.

A number of “bridge” programs are beginning to develop, or have already been operating at a number of institutions. Oregon State University (OSU) itself houses a summer bridge program, offered through Student Support Services, a center funded by TRiO to aid support disadvantaged student populations (OSU, 2011). Students are able to live and attend workshops on campus prior to the start of the academic year, gaining critical knowledge about the innerworkings of OSU while ultimately becoming acclimated to the campus community (OSU, 2011). This program is only offered to students via invitation, more than likely due to budgetary restrictions.

This past year, California Lutheran University (CLU) launched a pilot program that counseled first-generation students through a specially adapted summer orientation. For budgetary reasons, only ten students (25% of first-gen students at CLU) were able to attend the session, constituting roughly 40% of the entire undergraduate population at CLU (Lipka, 2010). A number of subjects were covered during the summer program, including faculty expectations, “course registration, study skills, personal health and financial aid” (Lipka, 2010). It is somewhat disconcerting that only a small percentage of first-gen students are able to attend such sessions. It signifies, however, that many institutions have, while some are beginning to recognize the
significance of mentoring efforts and the support needed with respect to first-gen and disadvantaged populations. In the future, one hopes that further funding might be available to accommodate other students.

Contact with an advisor (for all students) is essential, but especially so for first-gen students. Regarding advising practices, Payne (2007) comments that advisors should simply listen to these individuals and help them process their concerns or worries. “Listening,” Payne (2006) notes, “will go far with first-generation students, for they know that they have someone to discuss pressing issues or even just to relay academic or career ideas or thoughts.” Payne (2007) also recommends that knowledge of campus resources that will aid in overcoming academic barriers is essential, and a more “intrusive” form of advising may be necessary when asking about one’s progress. Simply asking questions, and being intentional about establishing rapport, will provide first-gen students with the sense that they are in fact supported.

Regarding faculty practices, McMurray & Sorrells (2009) recommend that instructors maintain more availability to students, establish community in the classroom, and through efforts involving attendance at student community events, establish a more “human” face so as not to be intimidating or “unreachable” (p. 213). Second, it is recommended that faculty provide redemptive opportunities for first-gen students. McMurray & Sorrells write,

“Initial academic shortcomings,” “will cause irreparable harm to the first-generation student if not adequately dealt with by the instructor. Many first-generation students may find it easier to not try rather than to risk additional failures if they perceive that there is no chance to recoup after an early poor performance” (p. 212).
Ultimately, through careful steps and greater means of assistance, first-gen students can be accommodated and pushed toward establishing personal success. Intentionality is necessary on the part of faculty to aid this traditionally struggling population.

**Conclusion**

Further research is ultimately needed with respect to understanding how different universities and student affairs personnel are combating cultural capital. Considering that cultural capital has been at the heart of higher education since its inception (the promotion of social and cultural elitism, in some ways), it will no doubt take time to help struggling students achieve a sense of validation amidst more traditional populations. Additional research is needed with respect to the development of first-gen populations, perhaps combining elements of different cultural and/or racial identity development theories, but ultimately developing a separate branch of theory altogether for this unique population. What with the diverse nature of the first-gen population, such an effort may be difficult to accomplish; however, without theoretical grounding, it may be difficult to understand and affectively aid students through programmatic and advising-based interventions. Developmental theory with respect to first-gen students then, in my mind, is needed, and should be utilized in advising-centered settings.

The findings presented in this piece suggest that first-generation students are a population that ultimately wrestles with a wide variety of issues tied to cultural expectations that seemingly displace or invalidate their presence and concerns in the academy. The standard has been set with respect to academic performance, benefiting “legacy students” who arise from privileged backgrounds and possess a working knowledge of how to compete and survive within the campus community. Though research indicates very few first-gen students succeed according to traditional expectations, it is evident that awareness of this campus group is becoming more and
more widespread. Institutions are recognizing the need for change within the classroom, as well as within different campus offices, to aid first-gen and other disadvantaged populations. Time, as well as intentional efforts and further education, will no doubt change the landscape and climate of our institutions in supporting diverse and historically marginalized populations.
References


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