

## **First-generation college students and their pursuit of the American dream**

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### **ABSTRACT**

First-generation college students, students whose parents have not earned a four-year degree, are not new to higher education, but their increasing presence at private, four-year institutions requires careful attention from administration and faculty. The rising costs of higher education combined with the nation's recent economic decline have made earning a college degree and achieving the American dream nearly impossible for these students. This qualitative research study seeks to understand the lives of first-generation college students at a small, private college in the Northeast. It draws on the analyses of demographic, interview, and case study data to examine the experiences of first-generation students and then to compare them to related research in the fields of sociology, psychology, and college access and preparation. The study results in three distinct case studies that provide insight into the individual lives of first-generation students. It concludes with specific steps this institution can take to respond to the needs of this growing population on its campus. Recommendations, though specific to the case, can be applied to other institutions facing similar challenges.

Keywords: first-generation college students, case study, qualitative research, higher education, cultural capital, private colleges

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## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF THE CASE

Education has always been touted as the path to prosperity in America. In 1848, Horace Mann, the first Secretary of Education in Massachusetts, regarded universal public schooling as “the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery (par. 6).” One hundred and sixty three years later, President Obama, in his 2011 State of the Union Address made similar claims.

...this is a place where you can make it if you try. We have different backgrounds, but we believe in the same dream that says this is a country where anything is possible. No matter who you are. No matter where you come from.

While the overall proportion of first-generation college students (students whose parents have not earned a college degree) has declined since the 1970s, one in six freshmen at American 4-year institutions today are first-generation students (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007) and more than a quarter do not complete their first year of college. An additional 90% do not graduate within six years (Greenwald, 2012). While not all first-generation students are the same, they share a similar set of characteristics. They often struggle academically, attain lower grades, work more while attending college than their non- first-generation peers, have fewer financial resources and attend lower-quality high schools (Stephens, Fryberg, Rose Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012).

The plight of first-generation college students at today’s American colleges and universities has worsened due to the skyrocketing costs of higher education. For example, in 1980, the estimated annual cost for undergraduate tuition, room, and board at a 4-year public institution was \$6, 381 compared to \$15, 605 in 2010 and at a private, not-for-profit it was \$13, 995 in 1980 compared to \$31, 975 in 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Funding for federal Pell Grant and Work Study programs covered 77% of attending a public, 4-year institution in 1980 but only 41% in 2007 (Engle, 2007).

Today, all colleges and universities, including the most prestigious ones, are committed to increasing diversity through enrollment. This includes socio-economic diversity that many first-generation students bring. In addition, Greenwald (2012) points-out that due to the overall decline in the number of students entering college, many colleges are “struggling to maintain enrollment” and therefore accepting a wider range of students, including first-generation students, than they have in the past (p. 2).

America used to have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world, but today it ranks ninth. President Obama has asked Congress to change the Higher Education Act so that colleges and universities that increase affordability while maintaining value would be rewarded with more federal aid. This is a step in the right direction (State of the Union Address, 2013).

The economic decline, the rising costs of higher education, and the compounding factors of race, language, ethnicity, immigration status, and social class position make earning a college degree and achieving The American Dream nearly impossible for first-generation college students.

If education is truly equalizing then why do so many first-generation college students remain disadvantaged?

## SELECTED LITERATURE REVIEW

### Academic preparation and college access

The struggle associated with first-generation college students begins before or as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> grade and is divided into two categories: 1) gaining entry to college and 2) persisting there to earn a degree (Engle, 2007). Parents of first-generation college students are less likely to help their children prepare for college entrance exams, accompany them on college tours, seek information regarding financial aid or attend information sessions (Engle, 2007). First-generation college students do not typically live in affluent communities or attend private high schools that offer high level math and advanced placement (AP) courses. Engle explains, “A rigorous high school curriculum, particularly one that includes advanced math, can greatly improve the chances that first-generation students will go to college” (2007, p. 28). Eighth grade algebra, viewed as a “gateway course” to more advanced math was not even offered in schools attended by one-fifth of first-generation students in the United States (Horn and Nunez, 2000; Choy, 2001; Engle, 2007 p. 29).

First-generation college students rank themselves lower than non-first-generation peers in ratings of math and writing ability, self-confidence, and leadership (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). Housel (2012) a former first-generation college student herself who is now a professor, points out that in high school she learned how to memorize but not how to analyze readings. She needed a semester of skill development before she “caught up” with her non-first-generation peers (p. 2).

When it comes to selecting a college, first-generation students, even when qualified for higher-ranking colleges and universities, tend to limit their choices. Engle (2007) found that they often apply to a single institution. This is primarily due to a combination of factors including lack of information about degree programs and limited income for multiple application fees. A first-generation college student in our sample reported that she did not understand the differences between a public institution and a private one and had only recently learned, while desperately trying to pay her college tuition, that she was attending a private institution. While first-generation college students rely on the advice from guidance counselors and relatives to select colleges, non-first-generation students consider a college’s reputation, availability of graduate programs, school rankings, and cost (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007; London, 1989).

### Cultural and social inequality

A hypothetical comparison of a first-generation student’s college experience with that of her non-first-generation peer is included in Appendix A. Informed by the work of Housel, (2012) and Orbe, (2004) it illustrates the lack of “cultural capital” that first-generation students have as they navigate the higher education landscape. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is first credited with using the term, “cultural capital” to recognize the social and cultural inequalities that exist between two groups of people (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1970, p. 49). More recently, Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson and Covarrubias (2012) have expanded on Bourdieu’s work by applying the “cultural mismatch theory” to the experiences of first-generation college students’ (p. 2). They corroborate the earlier work of Bowen,

Kurzweil, and Tobin (2005) by arguing that higher education maintains rather than diminishes social class inequalities resulting in a “social class achievement gap” (p. 1178).

Stephens et. al (2012) claim that colleges and universities operate on a set of shared middle-to upper-class cultural norms that are unknown to many first-generation college students from working class backgrounds. These norms define how a person relates to others socially. They argue that a person from a middle-to upper-class background has likely been raised to value independent ways of relating to others in the social world. For example, they are taught to “influence the context, be separate or distinct from others, and to act freely based on personal motives, goals and preferences,” (Stephens et. al 2012, p. 3; Markus & Kitayama, 2003). They come from families where their self-importance has been promoted and their individual preferences have been honored. They have had opportunities to choose, control, and influence their lives, because they have had enough economic and social capital to do so.

Conversely, first-generation college students, one half of whom is low-income or working class, (Saenz et. al 2007) have been raised to value interdependent ways of relating to the social world. For example, they are taught to “adjust to the conditions of the context, be connected to others and to respond to the needs, preferences, and interests of others,” (Stephens et. al 2012, p. 3). Children raised to embrace the interdependent norms have a history of limited economic capital. They have had few opportunities for choice, control, and influence. Their self- importance has not been the primary focus of their families.

Stephens et. al (2012) asked administrators from the top 50 American universities and 25 liberal arts colleges to identify the most important skills their respective institutions expect students to develop while in college. Eighty-four percent of the administrators selected skills that characterized their college culture as more independent than interdependent. They viewed success as defined by individual development, personal choice, and self-expression.

Stephens et. al (2012) then asked first-generation college students and their non-first-generation peers to rank their motives for attending college. They found that first-generation college students were more likely to name interdependent motives when compared to their non-first-generation peers. For example, 69% of first-generation students indicated that they wanted to help their families compared to 39% of the non-first-generation peers. Forty-nine percent of the first-generation students chose to pursue college, because they wanted to bring honor to their families, compared with 27% of non-first-generation students, and 61% of first-generation college students wanted to give back to their communities compared with 43% of their non-first generation counterparts. The study revealed that even after controlling for race and SAT scores, students whose motives for attending college were more independently focused achieved higher grades.

### **Psychological and familial conflict**

In his seminal work on first-generation college students, London (1989) framed the dilemma that many first-generation students face as a need “to reconcile the conflicting demands of family membership with educational mobility,” (p. 144). Drawing on psychoanalytic and family systems theories as well as Erikson’s theory of adult development (1959), London explains that it is common for late adolescents to separate from their families of origin to establish adult identities, yet it is particularly difficult for first-generation college students. He uses the term, “breakaway guilt” to explain the shame first-generation students experience when

they risk a real or perceived betrayal by the family (p. 153). Orbe (2004) similarly found that some first-generation students choose to maintain two very distinct identities: home and college, because by choosing their college identity, they are indirectly perceived as rejecting the family. There is also a discomfort associated with membership in both places described by Rendon (1992) as living “simultaneously in two vastly different worlds while being fully accepted in neither” (p. 56).

Students whose parents had earned a college degree perceived their entry to college as continuation of their schooling while first-generation students viewed it as a break or disconnection from what was familiar to them. Terms like “disjunction” and “discontinuity” are applied to first-generation students’ experiences of college entry (Engle, 2007, p. 33; Rendon, 1992, p. 64; Terenzini et. al 1994). Housel (2012) described it as “straddling two class cultures,” (p. 3) while Orbe (2004) goes even further explaining the need for first-generation college students to “negotiate multiple layers of identity” (p. 133).

Other researchers point-out that educational advancement comes with a psychological cost. “Mobility involves not just gain, but loss...loss of a familiar past, including a past self” (London, 1989 p. 168; Housel 2012). The first-generation college student also has enormous pressure put upon her to succeed. She is often viewed as the family’s savior, delegate, or way-out of poverty or less-desirable working and living conditions.

London (1989) used the psychoanalytic theory of Stierlin (1974) to analyze first-generation students’ life histories. He explained that within a traditional society, children receive messages from their families regarding their roles and ideas associated with work, family, religion, and community. These role assignments are passed down through the generations resulting in “intergenerational continuity” (p. 168). Children know what is expected of them and once they comply, their identity as an adult within the community is established and secured. Modernity, however, has changed society over time. It has promoted individual achievement, upward mobility, and a sense of discontinuity among families. Children who “break away” from their families of origin may experience guilt associated with abandoning a parent who is dependent on them (London, 1989 p. 153). This may lead to an insecure self or a self that needs to be re-negotiated with their families of origin.

One of London’s case studies featured Lisa, a first-generation college student from Ireland who learned that her parents’ support of her in college continued only if she maintained their working-class values and beliefs. Once she started talking about feminism and lesbianism and questioning the Roman Catholic faith, her parents viewed her as a radical. When she dyed her hair and cut it short, her mother called her “a disgrace to the family” (London, p. 161). Her new ideas, stimulated by her college course work offended her family, because they challenged the family’s long-held beliefs and values that were a part of their intergenerational system.

### **Compounding factors of race and ethnicity**

Nationally, first-generation college students are more likely to be a member of a racial or ethnic minority than their non-first-generation peers (Hutchens, Deffendall & Peabody, 2011). Research on high achieving African American students who attend predominantly white colleges or universities emphasizes the need for higher education institutions to create “sanctuaries for success” for students of color that help them feel a sense of belonging and acceptance that counteracts the alienation they may experience (Brooks, 2012, p.135) on predominantly white campuses. These smaller sub-communities may take the form of Black Student Unions,

community-research initiatives, honors programs, or advocacy groups. Freeman (1999) found that African American high school students who attended inner-city public schools, where whites were the minority, were suddenly faced with the opposite demographics in higher education. They found their entry to college intimidating and some felt uncomfortable at being assigned a white roommate.

Freeman (1997, 1999) explains “although not usually acknowledged in the literature and by the larger society, education has always been valued by African American families” (p. 7). In her research on college decision-making among African Americans, she highlights the significant role the students’ mothers and extended family members played in their desire to see their children achieve beyond their own levels of education. She also examines why some African American students’ aspirations to attend college do not result in college participation. She learned that some African American first-generation college students are not convinced that they will get a job that is equal to their level of schooling upon graduation. These findings likely reveal larger social ills, such as insidious forms of discrimination, structural racism, and oppression that people of color continue to face daily in American society.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Rationale for study**

This study takes place at a small private institution located in Boston, Massachusetts. The research and findings revealed in this article represent a portion of the larger on-going study. The research study began in the fall of 2010 when the principal researcher experienced three discrete events that led her to undertake such a study. 1) One of her students began crying during office hours when asked by the investigator where she was from in a friendly attempt to establish rapport. The student then explained that she was first in her family to attend college and that she felt rejected and misunderstood by her family of origin. The principal researcher decided to disclose her identity as a former first-generation college student in an effort to be supportive. 2) The president of the college in which the principal researcher worked announced at a college-wide meeting that the institution’s percentage of first-generation college students was growing. 3) In her role as an associate professor, the principal researcher taught a course on the social history of teaching in America from the Puritans to the present day. In her review of the Market Revolution, the investigator introduced the concept of social mobility for women and how by assuming roles as teachers and factory workers, women of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century began to advance their own social and economic status. It no longer mattered who their fathers or brothers were, and what type of family they were born into. The principal researcher began thinking about how the same concept applied to first-generation college students today. Higher education allows people the opportunity to reinvent themselves. The juxtaposition of these three seemingly unrelated events led to the impetus for this study.

### **Primary research question**

In this study, the principal researcher was interested in learning more about the experiences of first-generation college students at the institution where she worked. She was particularly interested in the psychological concept of identity renegotiation as it applied to first-generation students. In addition, she wanted to support the administration’s efforts to reduce

attrition and promote retention of all incoming students. She wanted to further understand issues related specifically to first-generation college students so that they could be addressed holistically and through a variety of ways that might include changes to the College's existing Summer Bridge and first-year seminar programs as well as to the advising model. In addition, the principal researcher was eager to learn how the College's faculty might alter their pedagogical approaches to ensure the success of more first-generation college students.

### **Sample and timeline**

This study began in the fall of 2010 when a 13 question survey was developed and administered to 114 first-year students during their first semester. While the primary purpose of the survey was to determine the percentage of first-generation college students entering the institution in 2010 and to gather demographic data about the sample, two of the 13 questions on the survey, were included to help minimize attrition. One question asked students to rank their confidence level in earning their degree within a 4-year period. The second question gave students an opportunity to identify problems they were encountering in their first semester at the college so that they could be addressed immediately by faculty or staff. The principal researcher sought the assistance of two other faculty members, both from the department of human development, as well as the associate vice president for student success to design the survey. She then sought the assistance of five additional colleagues who worked in the academic advising and assistance offices as well as of faculty who taught first-year seminars to aid her in administering the survey. Results of the demographic survey are represented by the table included in Appendix B.

The large percentage of first-generation college students (52%) present in our freshmen class when compared to the national percentage (17%) attending private, 4-year colleges (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf & Yeung, 2007) surprised the research team. This can partly be explained by the college's specific focus on preparation programs in education, social work, and in working with children and families in hospital settings. Middle-class students are typically drawn to the service professions such as teaching (Leming, 1991 as cited in Smith, 2000). It is also becoming increasingly more difficult to gain admission to state universities who are experiencing an influx of applications from more highly-qualified students who have decided to forfeit private education for a public one, saving thousands of dollars for advanced degrees.

Also interesting was that 92% of the first-generation college students in this sample had attended public high schools and of the small number of private schools attended, all were Catholic or Christian-based.

While more than half of our sample reported that they decided to attend college to earn professional credentialing required of their chosen profession, the research team hoped that once enrolled, they would begin to see the value of education beyond professional preparation (to achieve self-actualization, gain increasing knowledge, contribute to the world intellectually and expand their world view). It was encouraging to learn that 92% of the first-generation sample was confident or very confident that they would earn their degree within four years, and that 85% felt positive about their first semester experiences at the college.

At the request of the college president, survey data were analyzed and shared at the April 6, 2011 All College Meeting, a bi-monthly gathering of faculty, staff and administration totaling approximately 150 people. The agenda for this meeting was devoted to discussing the first-generation student population at the institution. For example, those assembled at table groups

were prompted to share assumptions they held about first-generation college students and to generate specific ideas about how to help them. Highlights from group discussions are presented in the table included in Appendix C.

## Data Collection

Of the 114 first-generation college students, 68 or 60% of the sample agreed to be interviewed. An interview protocol was developed (Appendix D) and an eight member research team that represented a cross section of faculty and administration from the offices of Student Success and Academic Assistance was assembled. Three training sessions specifically focused on developing the interview protocol and conducting an interview within the qualitative research context were held during the fall semester of 2011. While all of the interviewers had extensive experience working with students, only some had conducted research in the past or were published in their respective fields. The purpose of the seminars were to review the qualitative process and to practice asking questions that elicited open-ended responses aimed at understanding the experiences of first-generation college students at our institution. Readings about the qualitative method were also assigned and discussed, and digital tape recorders were purchased and distributed.

Interviews were conducted during the spring semester of 2011. The sample was divided among the eight member team randomly with the exception of assigning a small number of students who spoke Spanish to a faculty member on the research team who also spoke Spanish. This decision was made based on prior demographic data so that the students might feel more comfortable communicating in their first language or engaging with an interviewer who identified with their language and/or culture.

The interview team intended to interview all 68 students in the spring of 2011, but instead was successful at interviewing approximately 1/3 of the sample size, twenty-two students at this time. Some members of the interviewing team reported that they scheduled interviews with students who later cancelled or did not show-up. This behavior was attributed partly to the increasing demands placed on students at the end of semesters where they have final papers and projects due as well as to their reluctance to participate in the interview. In addition, a few members of the interview team had difficulty balancing the demands of their full-time positions at the college with their interview schedule. They simply did not have the time to re-contact students repeatedly after they did not attend an appointment. Still other members of the team were successful at arranging and interviewing their assigned students. The principal researcher took responsibility for the remaining forty-six students. They were contacted repeatedly via email and some of the students who lived nearby agreed to interview at the college's library during extended hours in the summer. Skype was also used by the principal researcher to interview additional students from the sample that lived farther away.

By the fall of 2012, the registrar confirmed that 14 of the 68 first-generation college students, approximately 20% of the interview sample, had left the college. Some left permanently and others had applied for and were granted a leave of absence. The email below is from a first-generation student the principal researcher had contacted to re-interview, because her first interview had raised a red flag. The principal researcher felt that this student could benefit from immediate intervention consisting of a range of college-wide services.

### **Email to a First-Generation College Student who Left College**

November 13, 2012

Hi [name of student]

I am [name of faculty member] who is reviewing all of the data on First Generation College Students. Your interview that was conducted with [name of staff member] in April of 2011 really stands out. I was wondering if I could meet with you to talk with you again about your ongoing progress at the college. I know you must be busy, but I can make myself available any time before or after Thanksgiving. The appt. might take 45 minutes or so. My office is on the [name of campus and office #].

I look forward to your response.

[Faculty Member's name and contact information]

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### **First-Generation College Student's Response**

November 19, 2012

I am not at [name of college] anymore, I am taking a year off. I am back in California for good because of personal reasons.

[Student's name]

While it is heart-breaking to lose any student to attrition, it is especially painful to lose a first-generation college student who has worked so hard to be admitted. As one can see from this email exchange, the student's response appears contradictory in that she implies it is temporary by the indication of the fixed amount of time off (a year) but also permanent by her use of the terms, "anymore" and the phrase "for good."

During the 2012-2013 academic year, the principal researcher was granted a sabbatical and was successful at interviewing the remaining 29/32 students. A visual representation of the data set is included in chart-form in Appendix E. The analysis includes a total of 51 first-generation college student interviews from the original sample of 68 students.

### **Data Analysis**

Analysis procedures applied to the interview data were multi-layered and characteristic of the grounded theory approach to qualitative data analysis introduced by Glaser and Strauss, (1967) and described more recently by Strauss and Corbin, 1990 and Rossman & Rallis, 2003. In such an approach there are no preconceived codes, but rather data are reviewed as it is collected and pattern codes are established by reviewing the transcripts line-by-line and by-hand,

paying close attention to regularly occurring phrases known as “in vivo” codes (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 106).

Taped recordings of all interviews were transcribed with an effort to preserve the participants’ words. Pauses, word emphases, mispronunciations and incomplete sentences were included in transcripts. As tapes were listened to (or watched in the case of the Skype interviews) “units of meaning were assigned to words, phrases, sentences and whole paragraphs” in an effort to organize the data into categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56-57). Metaphors introduced by participants were preserved. An example of this is when a first-generation student described her college experience as “a rollercoaster ride” complete with its ups and downs and when a second student used the phrase, “I’m supposed to be driving the bus now, but I’m so afraid that it will crash” to explain the transition from living at home with her parents to assuming responsibility for her own life while away at college.

Check-coding was used as a strategy for increasing inter-coder reliability. The principal researcher sought the assistance of two other colleagues, an associate professor of human development and an associate director of the college’s library to review interview data collectively and co-establish pattern codes. Reflective comments were written in the margins of transcripts and then transferred to data display matrices. These matrices included the pattern codes as well as the raw data that supported them and had additional space for participants’ repeated words and page numbers for supporting quotations from interview transcripts. During the interview phase, the principal researcher was invited to present initial findings on six occasions for various events at the college including first-year programs, a trustee presentation, a diversity dinner and accepted students’ days. These presentations, often co-designed by the principal researcher and a first-generation student or faculty member were extremely helpful in further clarifying interview data and “testing hypotheses that emerged during analysis” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 50).

All data analysis is subjective, but the principal researcher assumed responsibility for decreasing the amount of subjectivity inherent in the analysis by listening to tapes more than once, employing check-coding procedures, adhering to the conceptual framework and by using coding procedures that answered the primary research question. During this process, it was equally important to consider “rival hypotheses that question the researcher’s assumptions and biases” (p. 50).

The principal researcher discovered, for example, that first generation college students at this particular institution talked about the racial and cultural diversity of the Boston area as something that they had no prior knowledge about when asked to identify something that they were confused about in the initial interview. She wondered if this was related to their first-generation status or if it was merely reflective of the types of communities that they grew-up in, their limited travel, or their reaction to learning more about diversity in required courses. She wondered, for example, if non-first-generation college students at this institution would also identify racial and cultural diversity as something they were unprepared to encounter. In addition, the principal researcher was surprised to learn about parents who were not supportive of their child’s decision to attend college, despite how few. It did not even occur to her that any parent might not want their child to seek a higher education.

Lastly, three students from the interview sample were contacted and re-interviewed a second time for the development of case studies that follow the more generalized interview analyses. Pseudonyms were used in the case studies to protect students’ true identities. The principal researcher decided to complement the interview data with less condensed, more holistic

examples of first-generation students' lives. In doing so, she wanted to examine similarities and differences across cases and to study the themes and categories present in the interview sample in a more detailed way. In addition, the principal researcher was interested in seeing how national characteristics of first-generation students reported in the literature, were reflected in the cases. By using more than three forms of data collection (demographic survey, interview, and case) and analyses procedures, the data set is at first condensed and then later expanded revealing particularities of the specific cases. Though case study does not allow us to generalize the findings, it offers insight about first-generation college students as it reveals a portrait of an individual's life.

## FINDINGS

### Parent support of first-generation college students' decisions to attend college

"I had to be more independent. My parents didn't fill out the applications. I had to help them complete the FAFSA (financial aid form). I picked a school, registered for the SATs, took the ACTs, and like...the whole process of it ...I had to be on my own."

- Forty-eight of fifty-one first-generation college students reported that their parent or parents were supportive of their decision to attend college; many parents felt that a college degree could help their children "make more money."
- While most of the parents were encouraging, a large majority of the first-generation sample (87%) reported doing all of the work on their own with limited knowledge.
- Six percent of the sample reported that their parents did not support their decision to attend college; in one example a participant left the college after the first semester to attend a community college closer to her mother and grandmother; her departure was too emotionally difficult for her family so she decided to move closer to home.
- Thirty-seven of the fifty-one students regretted not being taken on a college tour by their parents.
- Seven students reported that since their parents did not attend college, they felt even more pressure by them to succeed; they perceived this pressure negatively.

### First-generation college students' views of high school preparation

"Well, I know that in high school, in some classes, you can get by very easily and pass them with a B or a C and you don't have to do much work. It's not really like that in college. So I think high school teachers should prepare us better by giving us harder work and by challenging us." 88% of the first-generation college student sample reported feeling unprepared for college; more than half of the sample said there should be a greater connection between high school curriculum and college work.

- One third of the sample (17 students) talked about how discouraging it was to have divisions in their high schools that advantaged some and disadvantaged others in terms of college preparation.
- Specific advice first-generation college students had for high school teachers was to hold students to a higher standard, use syllabi more and in the same way that it is used in college, gradually help them assume more responsibility for oversight of their work, increase the variety of writing assignments, focus more on writing and less on test

preparation, and assign more homework; one student reported not having more than 45 minutes of homework each night during her high school years.

- Nine students felt as if the grading in high school was not aligned with that of college; one explained, “Some of the classes are easy and they let you slip by with A’s without working for it.”

First-generation college students’ views of relationship with family

“I’m sorry...I can’t talk to you right now. I have all this work to do,” and my parents are like, “Wait...but, I thought you didn’t have a class now. So, it’s kind of like figuring out how to support them. Because, no matter how old you are, you are still their baby.”

- 44/51 or 86% of the sample used the word “separation” or a derivative of it to explain their changing relationship with their parent(s).
- 17 students expressed concern about their parents in their absence; one student continued to pay her parents’ bills on-line (as they did not have a computer).
- Most students used positive words to talk about their new sense of independence at college.
- About 5% of the sample who were from out-of-state expressed concern that they could not afford to go home as much as they desired.
- Two students who participated in Jumpstart (an organization that trains college students to volunteer in low-performing urban schools) perceived Jumpstart as their “family” away from home.

Aspects of college life that first-generation students felt unprepared for

“They put all these numbers down and expect you to know what each one means. My mother doesn’t know, and she expects me to find out and then tell her how it all works.”

The financial aid process; 43/51 students or 84% of the sample listed financial aid as confusing; a small number of students reported not having saved enough money for multiple application fees to colleges.

- The class selection, academic advising and registration process; 22/51 students or 41% of the sample experienced difficulty understanding requirements of their academic programs; some students noted that in some cases faculty advisors seemed unclear about what their courses counted for in the academic programs.
- The room selection process; students with specific issues such as asthma had to work harder to resolve residence issues.
- The racial and cultural diversity of people in Boston and at their field placement sites as well as the courses focused on understanding different types of people.
- Using the public transportation system in the city; many students were accustomed to being driven to and from places by a parent.
- Language and terms specific to higher education such as knowing the differences between “gen-eds” and “electives” and “academic advisors” and “student advisors” and “credits” and what the roles were of particular people assigned to help them.
- A small number of students (4/51) found that the way math is taught at this particular institution differed from the way they had been taught in high school.

First-generation students’ advice for faculty

“Some of the professors can be intimidating, but once you get to know them, they’re pretty nice. Each one has their own thing, like using APA or MLA or double-spacing papers or including a theorist in the response or even certain fonts to use! I feel like it shouldn’t be this confusing. It

took me awhile to get used to taking responsibility for the syllabus without verbal reminders. Some kids got it right away. They knew it, but it took me a while to get used to it.”

- 41/51 or 80% of the sample made positive statements about faculty.
- 27/51 students feel that faculty should help students understand the importance of the syllabus and that it is to be followed independently by the student; (help students view it as a contract between teacher and student; make few changes to it and allow students the opportunity to submit major assignments in drafts with feedback provided prior to a final submission).
- Don't assume that students have been taught citation methods for writing; teach them how to use specific method for their course.
- Require first-generation students to have individual appointments with faculty as many have come from large high schools and may not know how to establish a relationship.

## CASE STUDIES

### **The case of Katelyn Bennis: Why don't you want me to go to college?**

My parents have never really been there. All through the school ages, my parents never asked, “How's your homework going? I was always on my own.”

When Katelyn Bennis decided to apply to college and was notified of her acceptance, it was her mother who, like a magnet, tried to pull her back. “Are you sure you wanna' do this? Can't you just stay here and get a job?” “She didn't see any point to it,” Katelyn explained. As an only child born to a construction worker and a hair dresser, Katelyn had given up on the chance that they would approve of her decision. “When I was younger, I was always looking for my parents' approval. I wanted them to be proud, but somewhere along the line, you learn that you can be proud of yourself.”

Still, she misses her parents while she is away from them at college, worries about them, and knows that they love her. Both parents struggled with alcohol addiction, but her mother overcame it. Her father did not and suffered an accident that left him brain injured. He now has seizures and is unable to work. Her mother owned a beauty shop but was unable to continue working there due to health issues. “They both smoke.” “She had me at age 40 and couldn't walk the stairs.” She describes her mother as “depressed.”

Katelyn moved to her college in Boston from a city in Vermont. Though the separation from her parents was painful, the distance has given her perspective. “I can take my parents for who they are and for what they are. They're still my parents, and I love them. I can take a step back, breathe, and understand and accept what is. I'm not as quick to snap.”

In the first interview conducted in the spring of her freshmen year, Katelyn compared her first year of college to a rollercoaster ride. The highs included her excitement at registering for so many interesting classes, being accepted into the Student Advisor program, and being elected President of her own class council. When Katelyn shares this information, it's almost as if she has trouble believing it herself. “I'm shocked. I am also getting good grades, and I didn't really get them in high school.” The lows included knowing less about writing than she thought she did, reading at a slower rate than her peers, and completing the electronic financial aid forms on her own in between work and classes. “Some people can't imagine that there are still people who don't know how to use a computer these days, because it's expected that everyone does, but my parents are older, and it's just never been something that they needed in their life.”

Katelyn attended a large public high school in Vermont. She blames the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation for not being as prepared as she should have been in writing. “We did a lot of standardized testing, and it was a waste of time in English classes. Some of the teachers were afraid of losing school funding, so they focused entirely on testing.” Although today Katelyn continues to grow stronger as a writer, in her first year, she was surprised by what she did not know. “I definitely had to play catch-up very quickly, but I was given the tools here. It was hard at first to learn all of the mechanical things that I didn’t know...where commas should go ...what an adjective is, but now I don’t have to worry about that as much.” During her second year, Katelyn earned a GPA of 3.4, and she was given the Outstanding Sophomore of the Year award.

Katelyn has been working since she was 15 years old. She works summers at a local retail store, but hopes to change that to a job that is more closely aligned with her profession. She didn’t plan on going to college until she started working in a preschool program in high school, and learned that early childhood teachers needed college degrees. “I really care about how children develop and the tools they’re given. I want to be able to give that child as *much* as I possibly can.” Katelyn applied to only one college, the one she currently attends, because she could not afford more than a single application fee. She discovered the college on the College Board website and its mission, focused on enhancing the lives of children and families, seemed to speak to her.

Katelyn decided to combine her major in early childhood with one in American Studies because of a course she took titled, Sociology of Minority Groups. “The class was so mind-blowing-interesting to me that it influenced my decision to study sociology more.” It was about race, class, sexism, capitalism... and the major itself is about understanding different types of people and relating to all kinds of different people. If I stay in Boston and teach here, it will be really useful.”

Even when other students talked about taking a required history course elsewhere and transferring it in, because the course was perceived as challenging and the instructor intimidating, Katelyn accepted the challenge. “I hung my B+ paper on my wall, because it’s like an A in *that* class. I got a C in the class, but I was proud of that C!” Katelyn feels as if she has already learned so much. “Sometimes I run into students who will say that they’re skipping a class, because they have already completed the homework for it, but I could never do that. I feel like I’m holding onto the professor’s words. I’m trying to learn as much as I can from their experiences.”

Still, despite her success, always lingering in the back of her mind is the question of, “How can I continue to pay for this?” Only a week before classes started this fall, Katelyn sorted out the financial difficulties that allowed her to return as a junior. In addition to her term-time advisor role, she has a work-study position in the college’s family theatre. She builds sets and works backstage during performances. Though the hours vary significantly, during show times, she might work for over 60 hours in a single week at the standard minimum wage of \$8 per/hour. She finds it hard to find time to sleep and eat with so many other demands on her time.

Since her father has been hospitalized for his brain seizures, and medical expenses have gone unpaid, her parents’ credit has been adversely affected. They are no longer able to get the Parent Plus Loan that they had received in the past. This year, Katelyn’s mother was forced to contact a distant relative in California for help. Fortunately, the relative agreed to co-sign the loan. This made Katelyn uncomfortable since she did not have a relationship with the person. Reluctantly, she shares her family’s financial strategy. By putting loans in her father’s name, she

protects herself in the future. “I feel horrible saying this, [her voice drops] but with it in my Dad’s name...he would never live that long... you know? ... for the 25 year repayment.”

Katelyn’s internal standards require that she do everything well. As she talks about balancing the demands of her college life, her voice breaks a bit, as she tells me that a friend advised her not to be so hard on herself. “I have to sit and think about my work a lot. It’s hard to be around others who whip something out or read something quickly and understand it the first time. It has to be done well. I take pride in it. I don’t know...why I can’t...I feel like all of the things that I do (my classwork, advising, the theatre, being President of the Council), I can’t let go of any of them. It’s almost like letting go of a piece of myself.”

Katelyn says that during college breaks, most students are excited about going home, and although she enjoyed seeing her parents for Thanksgiving, she’s the opposite. “I feel like a different person here with all of the things that I’m accomplishing. I love seeing my parents, but they have no idea of what it’s like here or what I do here. They don’t ask questions, because they don’t know what questions to ask. It almost feels like a step *back* in a way.” Katelyn described her infrequent transitions to and from school as “like having two different lives.”

What is most rewarding to Katelyn about being a first-generation college student is her success at achieving this on her own. “I’ve learned so much. I constantly feel that. It’s still so exciting! I’m learning inside and outside of the classroom and although my friends’ parents are reading their papers and sending them back with comments on them, I get the satisfaction of doing it on my own.”

Katelyn is confident that she will earn her Bachelor’s degree. She clarifies, “as long as I can come up with the money.” She has little interest in pursuing a graduate degree at this time, “I don’t even understand what it is, and with all this debt, how could I go to graduate school?”

At first, she is reluctant to envision what her life might be like ten years from now. It is almost as if by saying it, she will have to commit to a different life than the one she has known. She is perplexed by what she thinks her mother will want her to do. “She lived with her parents until she was 25 and her Dad threatened to kick her out, because she didn’t work. She [her mother] still can’t wrap her mind around what I’m doing. She still expects me to come back after college and hang out at home.”

Eventually, Katelyn tells me that in ten years from now, she hopes to be living in Boston and teaching there. She would also like to have the opportunity to travel abroad.

Katelyn is introspective as she tries to rationalize her past. “Most people would be surprised to learn about my family life. I’m a cheerful person despite my background.” Her razor-sharp focus on self- development through education is reflected by her words. “I want a step-up. I want more than what my parents had in life. I would like to be the kind of person who is respected for all the knowledge that I have.”

### **The case of Jade Anderson: What will it take to know that I’m good enough?**

“It’s what you learn in adult development. I’m relying less on the approval of others and more on evaluating myself intrinsically.”

Jade Anderson is certain about one thing. She doesn’t ever want to live paycheck to paycheck or to depend on someone else, like a man, for money. “I want financial freedom, options and choices,” she declares. Jade hopes that by earning a college degree she will overcome the financial struggles of her past. Her mother worked hard her whole life to raise her and a younger brother, but she was forced to rely on child support and even then it was hard to

make ends meet. Jade is motivated by her mother's struggle. When asked how confident she is that she will earn a degree within four years, she replied. "It's higher now [her confidence level], because my mom has continued to struggle financially, so it feels like it keeps motivating me more when I go home. I think to myself, "I don't ever want to live like this. I never want to end up in a situation where I don't have enough money or enough resources in general."

Jade attended elementary school in Cambridge and Somerville, Massachusetts. Her family moved to Jaffrey, New Hampshire during her high school years. They now reside in Watertown, Massachusetts and Jade commutes to her college in Boston daily. As a bi-racial person (Jade's mother is White and her father is African American and American Indian), Jade had a difficult time at her public high school in New Hampshire. She explains, "I was one of four minorities in Jaffrey, and I faced a lot of challenges. I was forced to speak up...to defend things that I knew were not right...to advocate for myself. Although it wasn't a positive experience, it made me stronger." In her college classes today, Jade has no trouble expressing herself. She is completely engaged in what she is learning.

Jade was "dead-set" on attending a different college from the one that she is currently enrolled in, but "after sleeping over and attending classes there, I just didn't like the feel of it. I didn't feel right there." She decided to explore her current college that same weekend since they were nearby and also had an open house, but she got lost trying to find it and ended up a few blocks away. She telephoned the college's admissions office for directions. "They sent a person out to find me. A person came out in the rain with a big [college's name] umbrella and walked me back to the school!" She stayed for the Open House events and was immediately impressed by the level of diversity she saw reflected in the staff and faculty. "Multiculturalism is very important to me, and I felt accepted here. Everybody's different and it's reflected in the staff." Jade points out, "A college can say that it's diverse and then have an all -white staff and faculty." Jade and her mother were also pleased to learn that the college's President is an African American female. "This really spoke to us." In her first semester, Jade learned that her philosophy professor was also a rabbi and another one of her favorite courses was taught by an African American media expert.

Jade admits that she didn't really know that much about college to begin with, and despite having completed the Step-Ahead Program in high school that gave her the opportunity to take three college courses at Franklin Pierce University and then transfer them into her selected college, she still doubted herself. "I think it's a confidence issue. I studied acceptance rates and wondered, who's gonna' accept me? Who's gonna' take me in? That was part of my approach [to choosing a college] to be honest." [She laughs]. Jade's self-doubt continued to follow her into her first semester when she tested into her college's Honors Program but felt insecure about it as if it was some kind of mistake. When a staff person asked, "Are you sure you want to do this? Jade wondered if the person's question was really a judgment about her ability. She translated it in her mind as, "Maybe you're not smart enough." She began to believe it herself and decided to forgo the program for a regular course of study.

With a GPA of 3.82 in her junior year, Jade recently made the Dean's List. She is also one of 68 first-generation college students in the sample to be graduating with her Bachelor's degree in three years rather than the standard four. Jade achieved this by transferring college credit in from her Step-Ahead program in high school and by taking five courses every semester, including several over the summers. During the time of this interview, she was scheduled to graduate in the spring of 2013. "My mom's really proud!" she exclaims.

Jade regrets not pursuing the honors track, but at the same time, she's had more freedom in her program of study. At first, she was thrilled when she received a good grade on a paper or project, but now that she's almost completed her degree, she believes that she could be challenged more.

I'm getting good grades, but I'm not really earning them, if that makes sense.

In my heart of hearts, I could do better, but it's hard to change when you're getting rewarded all the time for doing mediocre work. It's kind of hard to have the intrinsic motivation to do better. I'm not trying my best, but I still get A's so I feel less rewarded. It's a double-edged sword, because I rely less on the approval of others now. I've experienced a shift in myself. I'm more self-authoring. I don't need as much external approval. I don't know... It's a weird place to be right now.

Jade wants to become a psychologist, because she is interested in helping people.

"Clinical psychologist ...maybe get my doctorate," she adds. One of her most fascinating courses has been her World Religions course, because she's developed a new respect for philosophy. "I love philosophy, and I used to make fun of people who were in it. I'd wonder, what are you gonna' do with that? I learned that it really connects with psychology, because it asks many of the same questions about people and the world around you."

As a first-generation college student, Jade's biggest supporter is her mother whom she describes as "brilliant." Her mother graduated cum laude from high school but was encouraged to work and start a family rather than to attend college. "She and my grandfather are really intelligent!" Her mother was an honors student in high school who works today as a medical transcriptionist for a major hospital. Jade exclaims, "She spends her time correcting doctors' notes and their grammar when they're the ones who are supposed to be highly educated, and she gets no credit for it."

Although Jade has always looked up to her mother and sought her help with homework and assignments over the years, she discovered that while in college, she can no longer rely on her the way she used to. "I don't talk about [name of college] at home. I keep it to myself." Jade explains, "I had my mom correct one of my papers for Philosophy, and I got a *worse* grade." Jade always viewed her mother as a strong writer and when challenged in the past by academic assignments, she found herself thinking...my mom will know." In the past, Jade admired what she described as her mother's "sophisticated writing style," but she understands today that while her mother's life experience and academic abilities might be strong, they may not apply to the requirements of a specific course in college. Jade shared how hard it was for both of them to experience this shift in their relationship. "My mother said, Oh Jade! I'm so sorry...really sorry...I'm afraid that you've outgrown me." Jade laments, "I didn't want to take that away from her." In a reversal of roles, she reported that her mother is considering returning to school. "I'm really proud of her for that. I know she can do it!"

Jade lived on campus for the first three semesters, because her mother wanted her to have the full college experience, but since then, she has returned home to live. She prefers living home, and it allows her the opportunity to work at a small retail store in the area in which she lives (though her mother tries to limit the hours per week to ensure her academic success at school). During the time of our second interview, Jade had also worked at the college's family theatre every weekend for the last five weeks where she serves as the House Manager. In addition to her financial aid work-study position at the theatre, she serves as a peer tutor earning minimum wage.

Jade admits that she has made enormous strides since her entry into the college when she had trouble understanding the language of higher education and the requirements of her degree program. “I didn’t understand what gen-eds were and what electives were and the difference between them, and I wasn’t really sure how to set-up for college work. I didn’t wanna’ seem dumb, so I didn’t ask many questions. I was confused about what student advisors did and what academic advisors did and how many credits I needed. Structural things...” When something was confusing or when she needed advice, Jade turned to upperclassmen or to her Resident Advisor, but now she goes to the faculty. “Because I’m no longer intimidated by them,” she declares.

Still, Jade has many questions about graduate school and how to move from her Bachelor’s degree toward a path that would lead to becoming a psychologist. She has taken the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) that is required by several universities, but she is having difficulty understanding her scores. “I’m going to graduate school, and I have nowhere to turn. I got the percentiles, and I don’t know how to even analyze my score.” Her prior self-doubt seems to re-surface when she wonders once again, “I’m not even sure who will accept me.” She states that it’s difficult to know what to specialize in in psychology, because she’s unsure of the options within the field. “And what the heck is a personal statement supposed to be like...serious... heartwarming?” Jade wants to go directly to graduate school since she has completed her undergraduate degree in only three years. “But I’m not sure if I’m good enough on the inside for graduate school. How do you know if you’re Harvard material, she asks? How do you know if you’re good enough for a large university like BU or BC?” When she is reminded that her academic performance is above average and therefore she is worthy of consideration, she remarks, “I just don’t think like that.” When asked what it would take for her to believe that she’s worthy of acceptance in a graduate program, she laughs and then sarcastically replies, “An acceptance letter?”

As a first-generation student, Jade advises the College to integrate first-generation students into the general population while providing them with specific support. “I don’t want any stigma associated with first-generation, because it would be a huge deficit—someone who’s viewed as less than.” She believes that when integrated the first-generation students would rise to the occasion and learn from the experiences of the whole group. Comparatively, Jade believes that the College’s Summer Bridge Program, designed to help students strengthen their time management, writing, and academic skills prior to their first semester, is viewed negatively by the general student body. “They’re referred to as ‘the Bridge kids’ and people say, ‘Oh, they’re the slow ones...the people who are not ready for college, you don’t want to be one of those! They’re looked down on.’”

While Jade recognizes the progress that she’s made and acknowledges her success as a first-generation college student, her new identity is linked to financial independence. “Money is still a big part of the equation for me, because my mom is still paying my loans.” In ten years from now when Jade is 30 years-old, her dream is to be “financially self-sufficient.” She says, “I want to be completely independent with two feet on the ground so that I can take good care of my mother.”

### **The case of Emily Roberts: On the road to the Ph.D.**

“My GPA is 3.98 but I want it back to 4.0 by the time I graduate. I’m applying to competitive doctoral programs, and I need to make myself as strong as a candidate as possible. I have very high expectations of myself...almost to a fault.”

Emily Roberts began working on her family's blueberry farm in Maine when she was 3 years-old. "It was expected of me. We all got up at 5 a.m. and went out. I had my little cranberry rake instead of the big blueberry rake, and I got a box before lunch. I still go out at 5 a.m. in the winter time, even when I don't have to get up, to shovel the driveway so that my parents can go to work. "You do what you need to do, whether you like it or not, because that's how you keep things running."

Emily's "can-do," no-nonsense approach to life serves her well as a first-generation college student. Her strong work ethic and her ability to plan in advance have earned her the position of top student in her class with a GPA of 3.98 at this, our second interview. Emily always planned on going to college. "It never really occurred to me not to go," she explains. She is the youngest of three children with two older sisters who have already earned college degrees. Her oldest sister, who is 34 years-old, has earned a master's degree. She describes her parents as "capable" and "intelligent" people who met in college but were unable to complete their degrees when her oldest sister was born. "So it didn't work out," she adds, "they're almost but not quite college-educated," Emily clarifies.

Her mother is a mental health care coordinator at a local health center. She has done this type of work for the last 12 years initially working with victims of domestic violence. She currently prepares intake referrals for therapists and does tobacco cessation counseling. "She has all of her CEUs [certification education units], but she can't take the test, because she doesn't have the degree." She is being promoted soon to an administrative position. Emily's father worked in construction and then managed a construction company. He was laid off during her senior year of high school. He then was re-employed at Ace Hardware only to be laid-off a second time, when the economy plummeted. Now he is working at a blueberry factory doing a variety of jobs.

Her family lives on their own blueberry farm where they grow organic blueberries in the summer and sell them to local distributors. "Dad and I get home from work at 5, and we rake for two hours. We try to get 10 or 15 boxes a piece." On the weekends, Emily rakes with friends to help support her family's goal of filling 100 boxes per weekend.

Emily attended a public high school in Maine which she describes as, "Small with only about 200 students located in a small town with not a lot of opportunity." Her graduating class consisted of 52 students. Emily's desire to become a child psychologist may have been fueled by regular visits to her mother's office as a child. Emily explains, "She started the job when I was 9. I used to go to her office after school, and I always read at a higher reading level so I would read pamphlets about schizophrenia and drug addiction." Emily is interested in working with children who have severe emotional and behavioral disorders. "I don't think enough is being done for them," she says, "their brains aren't even fully developed yet, and we're treating them with psychotropic meds used for adults. I want to get away from giving Clonidine to 4 year-olds." Emily is looking forward to working at the Italian Home for Children in Boston for one of her practicums associated with her degree program.

At age 21, Emily Roberts exudes confidence and competence. Sitting across from her, one cannot help but be impressed by the future that she has envisioned for herself. She plans ahead, considers several options, and makes decisions based on logic and research. As an honors student, Emily is majoring in counseling psychology and earning a certificate in Community-Based Human Services. She is also minoring in Autism. Her goal is to earn her doctorate within the next 6 years in clinical child psychology. She is in the process of taking the GRE (Graduate Record Exam) required for entry into her three top-choice institutions: Yale University, the

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Duke University. Emily selected these institutions, because they offer programs in her desired area but also because, “I wanted to stay on the East Coast. It’s just easier.” She intends to finance her graduate education by becoming a teaching or research assistant as well as through fellowships. “I know that once I get my master’s degree, I’ll be a better candidate for these positions.” Emily laughs when she described her Christmas list this year. “It was really boring. It included The APA Guide to Clinical Programs and GRE guide books.” Mom was like...really?”

While Emily does not experience any academic issues related to being a first-generation college student, she does struggle with financial ones. She explains, The financial piece is definitely HUGE. I actually almost couldn’t come back my sophomore year, because [her parents] they paid \$14,000 out-of-pocket my freshmen year. We had no heat in the house. We got shampoo for Christmas. My parents had to sell a car and they said, “Emily, this can never happen again.”

Ironically, Emily’s father’s misfortune at being laid-off that year made her eligible the next year for the Pell Grant. Her desire to never place her family in this position again led her to explore additional scholarship monies. Due to her high GPA, she applied for, and then received an additional \$8,000 scholarship. Emily also balances work with the demands of the honor’s program. She is paid through the federal work-study program, and she also receives term-time and stipend pay for additional work that she does on campus. Emily is a peer tutor, a student success mentor at her college’s academic disability and advising office, and a math leader for the course, MAT 120. Emily also works at the library and at the college’s Summer Bridge Program.

When asked if she felt different, while at home, from the person she was at college—a shift that most first-generation college students experience—she said that she did not. Emily clarified her response in the following way.

Not in my family, but I do feel that way with people in my community that I don’t have much in common with anymore-- It’s a fishing and agriculturally-based community--It’s hard for the older people to understand [going away to college]. There’s a lot of push-back when you leave. I wasn’t looked down upon, but it’s hard for the older people to accept, because, generally, we don’t come back. There’s no opportunity to stay. They want you to succeed, but you can’t continue to succeed without leaving. So...it’s hard. It’s an interesting dynamic.

Emily seems sad when she talks about the difficulty of trying to advance while staying loyal to the community in which she was raised. She talked about how conflicted she felt when she returned home and discovered her former best friend working at the local grocery store. “She was supposed to go to Lesley [University] but her parents couldn’t pay, and she stayed in Maine. She shacked-up with this guy and is getting married. She had her first baby. What do we talk about now? ... How’s the baby? I see her and it’s cordial, but awkward... [Her voice drops] I don’t have many friends from back home anymore, because it’s so disparate.”

Emily loves the college that she attends and is happy that she decided to go there. “The professors are wonderful,” she exclaims. One of the most fascinating courses she has taken thus far was a course on Greek mythology. “It didn’t have anything to do with my major. I had not read *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad* before, and I wasn’t expecting to enjoy it. It was SO interesting. It was fascinating, and I learned so much. I fell in love with it! I could tell you about the ridiculous symbolism in *The Odyssey*, and now that I’m taking a course called, Trying Socrates, it’s a really helpful background to have. It’s a good exercise in a brain muscle, because I’m so specialized usually.”

Despite her optimism about her college experience, Emily thinks that the College can better support first-generation college students by holding them to high expectations. She explains, “Sometimes [College’s name] is too flexible, too giving. The bar is set, but it’s not really a big deal if you don’t meet it. Deadlines are not really considered deadlines. This angers Emily, because she submits all of her assignments on time and sometimes receives the same grade as a person who turns a paper in a week late. “It annoys me! Being responsible was always expected of me in my household. It’s not doing anyone any favors, because there is rarely a workplace where if a report is due on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and it’s the 22<sup>nd</sup>, and you haven’t started it yet, the boss is going to say, “Oh, that’s okay.”

Emily also believes that faculty should invite students to office hours more than once during a semester, if possible, because she believes that shy students, who might have had more formal relationships with their teachers in high school, may not know how to develop a relationship with a faculty member. She has learned through her peer tutoring that first-generation students are often the types to avoid office hours, feel intimidated by faculty, and refrain from interacting with them on campus or in the cafeteria. Emily feels that if the relationships with faculty are not developed early on, the students are less likely to seek faculty assistance or support regarding an assignment or an aspect of the course they might be confused about.

Emily feels that being a first-generation college student does advantage her in that it gives her the drive and motivation she needs to succeed and achieve. “You just kind of want it a little bit more. I have seen my parents stopped, because they don’t have that stupid piece of paper. I know how valuable it is; because you see how not having a degree disadvantages them and acts as a barrier.”

When asked to paint a picture of her life 10 years from now, Emily is quick to respond and specific about the details of what lay ahead. “I will have a Ph.D. and be married... probably with one child. I’ll be working at a residential facility for children with EBDB (emotional and behavior disorders) ages 4-12. I’ll probably be working on research of some kind related to an anti-medicine approach to teaching this population.” Emily’s future, so carefully envisioned, will be shaped by her capable hands.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

Though each uniquely different, all three of the first-generation college students featured in the case studies continue to struggle financially while attending a private, 4-year institution. Katelyn seems to be the most vulnerable at this time as her parents are also ill and unemployed. Her ability to pay for the next semester of her senior year is still uncertain at this time. While the federal government has provided funding for low-income first-generation college students through Gear-Up and Trio programs, few first-generation students know that such programs exist, because they are preparing for college on their own and trying to educate their parents about the process. The effectiveness of Trio and Gear-Up Programs is also being disputed today and the regulations for receiving funding are becoming more restrictive (Nelson, 2013).

All three of the case study students appear to be on-track in completing the requirements of their degree program. In terms of persistence regarding degree completion, Jade, the daughter of a single parent was the only student in the larger sample and among the case studies to complete her degree within three years. Her participation in a Step-Up program that allowed her to take three college courses while still in high school positioned her well for degree completion.

Academically, it is encouraging to see that all three students are completing their requirements at this private, 4-year institution. Their success may be partly due to the size of the institution and the personalized culture of learning that faculty members provide and that a larger university may not be able to offer first-generation college students. It is also worth noting how enthusiastic the students are about some of the required courses in the arts and sciences, ones they had never imagined learning about!

Katelyn represented other first-generation students in national samples who report feeling less prepared for college. Her initial entry was difficult, and she admits that it takes her longer to read and process than some of her classmates, but she is persevering. Conversely, Jade needs more of an academic challenge. Her decision to forgo honor's level courses has left her feeling unsatisfied. Her high grades despite what she calls "mediocre" performance may be an indication of grade inflation or she may need more intellectual challenge. Emily, who meets the federal definition of first-generation status, since neither parent has earned a degree, is influenced by the degrees earned by both of her older sisters. Her success in the honor's program and her general knowledge about higher education is not representative of first-generation students nationally or in the larger interview sample associated with this study.

Jade and Emily's parents were supportive of their desire to attend college, while Katelyn's parents were not. While Jade's mother struggled financially, she never wavered in her desire to want more for her daughter, and she was viewed by her daughter as an excellent writer.

Emily's chosen profession was partly influenced by the work that her mother did and although she seemed to experience less difficulty establishing a college identity than the other two students, she did experience a sense of loss at leaving her small community behind.

Katelyn embraced her new college identity so completely that she risked taking on too many responsibilities, yet if she let go of one leadership position or activity, she feared that her whole new identity might come crashing down. Her fear about reverting back to who she was before college is an indication that she is trying to reconcile the integration of her former and current selves.

Jade, who talked openly about the importance of multiculturalism and of her need to feel comfortable at college was also the only student among the three that talked about the importance of race. Identifying as bi-racial, she understood, first-hand, how difference of any kind may be perceived negatively. Her insistence that first-generation college students receive support while not being separated from the other students is the challenge that institutions of higher education must face. There is always shame associated with social class divisions that intersect with the lives of many first-generation college students, but the internal drive, motivation and determination that first-generation students bring is palpable. First-generation college students deserve an opportunity to educate themselves, to advance their social, cultural, and intellectual knowledge, and to have an impact on generations of family to come.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

The results of this study reveal specific changes this institution can make immediately to support its growing first-generation population. These recommendations may also apply to other institutions of higher education that are faced with a growing percentage of first-generation college students on their campuses.

- 1) Establish funding specifically for first-generation college students

- 2) Devote a section of the website to user-friendly resources for first-generation students and their families. (Articles, success stories, scholarship information).
- 3) Hire and train additional staff in the areas of student support to reach out to first-generation students (at least 3 times) each semester
- 4) Design advising systems that pair former first-generation college faculty with current first-generation students; pair first-generation college seniors with entering students
- 5) Re-examine the Summer Bridge Program in order to design specific support for first generation students
- 6) Become more deliberate in identifying first-generation college students at the admissions stage and following and tracking their progress toward graduation.
- 7) Establish programs that help teach first-generation college students about graduate study
- 8) Help first-generation college students identify internships and summer employment opportunities that align more specifically with their professional goals
- 9) Investigate a relationship with Bottom Line, a college access organization located in Boston and New York that provides programs in access and college completion for first-generation college students ([www.bottomline.org](http://www.bottomline.org))
- 10) Devise ways to make the financial aid process more user-friendly and supportive for all students, but especially for first-generation students and their families.

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## Appendix A

**The Privileges of Cultural Capital: A comparison of a first-generation college student's experience with a non-first-generation peer**

<b>First-Generation College Student</b>	<b>Non-First-Generation College Student</b>
Attends substandard high school with no or few advanced placement courses	Attends high-quality high school with advanced placement options
Participates in few extra-curricular activities	Participates in wide-range of extra-curricular activities to build college resume
Takes college entrance exams without preparation	Takes Princeton Review course to increase college entrance exam scores; attends college "boot camp"
Searches for colleges alone in senior year of high school on internet	Goes on college tour with family in the junior year of high school or earlier
Selects one or few colleges to apply to and completes application on her own	Selects 3-7 colleges to apply to and prepares application with parents; parents insist that she apply to schools that they have graduated from
Unprepared for start of classes; has to wait for financial aid check to be disbursed to buy books and supplies	Purchases books and supplies prior to start of first class from pre-set bank account (debit card) designated for expenses
Struggles academically in college course work and is referred to academic advising and support services; drops-out of one course	Decides to over-load by taking one additional course beyond what is required to complete college degree in less time; parents arrange for tutor to increase grades in math
Spends summers working at retail store and fast food restaurant in local mall	Spends summer completing competitive internship in prospective field; travels internationally with family
Relies exclusively on financial aid, high-interest bearing loans that parent must take-out, and minimum wage earnings from summer to pay for college	Relies on college fund to pay for all or some of the cost of college; subsidizes costs with earned merit scholarship and grandparents' support
Does not consider participating in semester abroad or international service learning programs due to limited finances	Studies abroad and/or participates in international service learning programs; family plans vacation to semester abroad site to visit student
Graduates but is unsure about how to enter workforce in field of study; doesn't	Graduates a semester early and relies on family's professional contacts and prior

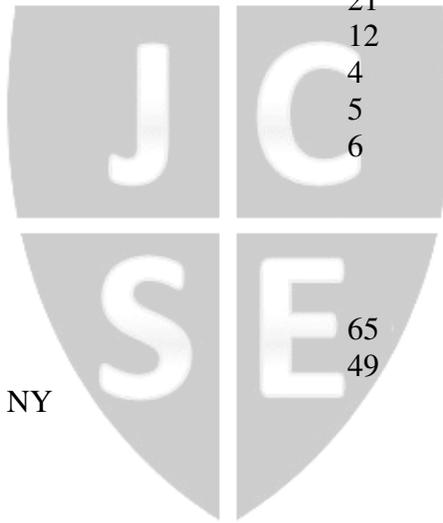
interview well or dress appropriately for professional interviews; struggles to find work	internship experiences to obtain employment in related field; buys professional suit for interview and practices with parents
Has no plans to enter graduate school due to limited understanding of degree options and lack of finances	Decides to seek advanced degree and starts applying to programs to improve professional standing and quality of life options later
Returns home to live with family due to unsustainable debt and need to care for a family member; contributes to family's income	Establishes self independently from family and begins young adult life; mother helps her furnish her first apartment



**Appendix B**

**Demographic Data on Entering First-Generation College Students: Fall, 2010**

<u>FG Students</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Total Number	114	52%
Females	101	89%
Males	13	11%
 <u>Race/Ethnicity</u>		
White/European descent	67	59%
Hispanic/Latina/Latino	21	18%
Black/African descent	12	11%
Asian descent	4	3%
Bi-Racial/Multi-racial	5	4%
* Other (Cape Verdean, Haitian, American Indian, Brazilian, "Human")	6	5%
 <u>Home States</u>		
MA	65	57%
Outside of MA (NH, ME, VT, CT, RI, NJ, NY MD, PA, FL, & CA)	49	43%



<u>High School Type</u>		
Public (includes 1 Public Charter School)	105	92%
Private (All Catholic or Christian-based Schools)	9	8%
<u>Family Structure</u>		
Mother and Father	68	60%
Mother	25	22%
Grandmother	1	.9%
Adoptive Mother & Father	1	.9%
Adoptive Mother	1	.9%
Biological parent and stepparent	5	4%
Stepmother	1	.9%
Families with more than (2) parents (including aunts, uncles, and grandparents living together) as well as blended families caring for children within two households	12	11%
<u>**Reason for Pursuing College Degree</u>		
Required for the job I want to do	58	51%
To earn enough money to support self and provide for family	25	22%
To expand knowledge; reach full potential	13	11%
To build a better future	23	20%
	74	65%
<u>Confidence at Earning a Degree within 4 years</u>		
Very Confident	31	27%
Confident	1	.9%
Confident-Somewhat Confident	7	6%
Somewhat Confident	1	.9%
Not Confident		
<u>FG Students' Experience at College in First Semester</u>		
Very Positive	41	6%
Positive	56	49%
Positive –Somewhat Positive	1	.9%
Somewhat Positive	16	14%
Negative	0	--%
*One respondent checked more than one category for race/ethnicity.		
**Some students selected more than one response for reason for pursuing a college degree.		

**Appendix C**

<b>All College Meeting on First Generation College Students: April 6, 2011</b>	
Assumptions about FGCS	<p>Lower income; working poor; working class</p> <p>More come from single-parent households</p> <p>“Not as smart; not college material”</p> <p>More people of color</p> <p>“Not as cultured”</p> <p>View college degree as preparation for specific career</p> <p>Not prepared as well in high school</p>
Challenges FGCS face at this institution	<p>Financial; not having enough money to finance degree; not understanding how to use financial aid; not understanding debt accrual or college loan applications; parents not prepared for reality of financial strain</p> <p>Lack of access to resources (information, preparation, and advice)</p> <p>“They don’t know what it is that they don’t know.”</p> <p>Shame involved in asking for help</p> <p>Guilt at not being home to assist family; pressure at having to succeed for family</p>
Implications for faculty, administration and staff	<p>Define expectations of syllabus, explain contractual nature of syllabus</p> <p>“Don’t assume all students understand higher-education vernacular (explain what office hours are).</p> <p>Help students with time-management and advertise writing and academic support services</p> <p>Hire more faculty, staff, and administration to reach-out specifically to this population</p> <p>Consider assignments that are issued in stages where re-writing is accepted and drafts are used prior to final submission.</p>
Ideas for expanding student services to support FGCS	<p>Raise more money for FGCS students; increase funding streams, offer FGCS scholarships; develop web site for FGCS and families to identify and access additional scholarship monies, grants, and awards;</p> <p>Hire and train counselors to make 3-4 checks on students each semester to help them achieve social-emotional and academic success;</p> <p>Develop more career-oriented professional development seminars and obtain additional internships to assist the FGCS student population</p> <p>Organize cohorts of FGCS in First Year and Bridge Programs</p> <p>Pair FGCS with 3<sup>rd</sup> year student for mentoring support</p> <p>Pair former FGCS faculty with cohorts of FGCS for academic advising</p> <p>Collect data on FGCS status at admission stage and track FGCS to graduation date to determine persistence and attrition rates and to provide ongoing support</p> <p>Provide website of FAQ and other academic resources specifically designed for FGCS and their families</p>

**Appendix D**

### First-Generation College Student: Interview Protocol

1. Are you a resident student or a commuter student?
2. Now that you are a college student and the first in your family to pursue the completion of a college degree, what is it like to go home during breaks or long weekends?
3. Can you tell us about your relationship with your parent(s) and family members? Has the relationship changed? Stayed the same?
4. Why did you decide to come to college? Why do you want to earn a college degree?
5. In your view, are there differences between the experiences of first-generation college students compared to students whose parents have earned a college degree? Why or why not?
6. Can you describe what your experience has been like in college now that you are almost finished with your first year?
7. Faculty members and administrators sometimes assume that college students know certain things that they might not necessarily know or understand, can you share with me any experiences that you've had thus far in your courses or in your classroom experiences that have been confusing to you because a person assumed you knew something that you didn't? Can you think of any circumstances where you felt confused because you had no prior knowledge to draw on?
8. Have you felt confused about anything outside of the academic experiences including residential life, extra-curricular activities or any non-classroom experiences? Please explain.
9. You completed a survey in the fall of 2010 that asked you to rank how confident you were in earning a college degree within a 4-year period. On the survey you took in the fall, you indicated that your confidence level was \_\_\_\_\_. Is the ranking the same today or has it changed? Please explain.
10. On the same survey, you ranked your experience at \_\_\_\_\_(institution's name) thus far on a scale from 1-4 as a \_\_\_\_\_. Is the ranking the same today or has it changed? Please explain.
11. As a first-generation college student, what would you say has been the greatest challenge to you thus far in your college experience?
12. As a first-generation college student, what would you say has been the greatest reward or most positive aspect of being first-generation?
13. If you were giving advice to other first-generation students who are now in high school, what would you say?
14. Are you currently satisfied with your academic performance at the college? Why or why not?
15. Do you have any advice for the administrators who work in the offices here that support the college experience?
16. If you had the opportunity to return to your high school to speak to your former high school teachers about college preparation, what would you say?
17. If you had the opportunity to give advice to parent(s) of first-generation college students, what would you say?
18. Does being a first-generation college student make you feel different in any way?
19. Do you think the experiences of non-first-generation college students are likely to be the same or different from yours? Please explain.

20. Is there anything else that you would like to raise about being a first-generation college student?



**Appendix E**

