



First-Generation College Students: Then and Now

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine past and present first-generation college students, how they have changed demographically, and what colleges can do to assist them in meeting the challenges of higher education. A brief, descriptive memoir of the author as a first-generation college student precedes a concise review of current studies on this student population.

INTRODUCTION

Thirty to forty years ago, first-generation college students were predominantly white, working class, baby-boomers whose parents were often first and second generation European immigrants. Over the past three decades demographic changes in race, ethnicity, language and socioeconomic levels have changed the face and cultural experiences of today's first-generation students. This article seeks to examine past and present first-generation college students, how they have changed—or not changed—and what colleges can do to assist them in meeting with success in higher education. Before discussing recent studies on this topic, this article begins with a description of one first-generation student attending college in the 1960s and 70s.

MY STORY

“Stay in school!” These were words of advice often spoken by my father. He

wanted me to have a better life, as most parents do. But he did not have to push me in that direction. Since I first entered school in 1956, I always enjoyed school life, for the most part. Raised in a predominantly Italian, Irish, and Catholic neighborhood, I never realized how poor I was because we were all poor. In this tight-knit, working class neighborhood in East Boston, most families had two parents and while the mother cared for the family and home, the father was the sole source of financial support. I played and went to school with the same children, so there was a deep sense of belonging. For the most part, we all got along, playing simple street games “until dark” on summer nights and “until dinner” on school nights.

I attended the Catholic grammar school across the street from my house. It was a small, poor parish school serviced by the Sisters of Notre Dame, a congregation of religious women who originated in France and Belgium and who came to the United States for the purpose of teaching in

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such schools. The sisters taught us using traditional methods of rote memory and testing, a system commonly employed in the 1950s and 60s. I blossomed in this environment because I clearly understood what was expected of me and I enjoyed the loving atmosphere created by the sisters. In essence, I thrived in this poor but amicable setting.

As I entered preadolescence, I began to explore my world with my friends, many of whom were boys my age. Taking many risks, I learned to swim by jumping off abandoned piers, former ports for the ferry connecting East Boston to "the mainland" downtown Boston. I slid under turnstile bars to catch a free ride on the public subway system and traveled to Revere Beach, quite a distance for an eleven-year-old. One summer day, with little to do, we made a game of "ringing and running," a mischievous task of randomly ringing doorbells and running away. Someone called the police, and I was eventually brought home to my parents where they administered a grave punishment of no dinner and an evening alone in my bedroom to think about what I had done. That evening I heard my mother discussing my behavior with my father. "We have to move, Jay." My dad's name was John, but she called him Jay. "She is getting too wild. The *police* brought her home...what next!"

Later that summer, my mother found a large apartment for rent in a two family house in a much nicer area of Boston. And so, I found myself alone, separated from my friends by what seemed like a continent, in the Dorchester Lower Mills area. I was no longer surrounded by familiar friends and families. The homes were much bigger with bigger yards, and no one played in the streets. In fact, I never realized any children lived in the area until I enrolled in a new school that September. The only consolation to this traumatic change was that the new school, again a Catholic school, was taught by the same

sisters. So I began grade 7, knowing only one person, a sister who was transferred from the school in East Boston to the new school in Dorchester. I slowly changed from an adventurous, curious young girl into a very unhappy, lonely adolescent. In spite of such changes and isolation, I managed to maintain success in school, academically at least.

This new school was much larger than my other school. There were about fifty students in each classroom and three of every grade, kindergarten through grade 8. Most students had Irish surnames and had already well-established social groups; actually they were tight-knit cliques. For a newcomer, especially someone with such strong Italian ethnic connections, it was nearly impossible to form new friends. It was during this time that I began to stay home more and more and, consequently, focused my excess time on playing the piano. I had already had several years of private piano lessons at my former school, but now I was more focused than ever. What else was there to do!

In addition to facing this isolation, I felt different in many other ways. To begin with, I ate very different foods than my peers. They took peanut butter and jelly or tuna sandwiches in their lunch, while I had cold Italian meatloaf or salami and cheese sandwiches, which saturated the air with strong scents of garlic and spices. The girls were, of course, very pretty with long blonde or auburn hair and blue eyes, while I had dark brown hair, brown eyes, and was, shall I say, rather "chubby." Many of my classmates were picked up after school by their parents in very nice cars. My parents could not afford a car, so we took public transportation. The longer the isolation lasted, the more I felt disconnected and worthless.

Now, you might ask yourself, how could she call herself poor if she attended Catholic schools and had private piano lessons? Yes, this might seem ironic, but in the

50s, school tuition was less than \$100 per year and piano lessons ranged from \$0.75 to \$1.00 for a half hour lesson depending on your level of proficiency.

There were other factors which widened the gap between me and many of my peers. Both my parents were first generation American born. My mother's parents came to the U.S. from Italy with little money, and the only skill my grandfather had was as a laborer, fixing roofs, minor plumbing and other odd jobs. When my maternal grandmother died suddenly in a tragic fire, my mother as the oldest of seven was forced to leave school in 10th grade and go to work to help support the family. With her limited language and math skills, she insisted that I put forth my best effort in all my school work. She was a hard-working, family-oriented woman who wanted the best for her family.

Born in Boston, my father was raised by a single-mother who arrived in the U.S. from Russia in early 1917 during the Russian Revolution. My paternal grandmother never learned to speak English and found it difficult to find work and support her family. Growing up in the West End of Boston, my father was exposed to many immigrant groups from Eastern Europe who settled in Boston in the 1920s and 30s. He had a gift for language and consequently became fluent in several Slavic languages, as well as Yiddish. As a young man, my father was very adventurous, so after completing high school he enlisted in the Merchant Marines. He traveled from port to port visiting many cities in North, South and Central America. This was his only educational experience beyond high school. After marrying my mother in 1949, he landed a job as a machinist, making steel components for ships. His company received several contracts from the U. S. Navy which guaranteed his job for some 25 years. Although my father was also hard-working and family-oriented, he was fun-loving, even mischievous—unlike my mother who was much

more serious. My father was a jokester and could lighten up any room.

After taking the Catholic High School Entrance Exam, I was accepted to several prestigious Catholic high schools in the greater Boston area. But my parents could not afford the cost of tuition, so I attended the local parish high school for girls. Classes were large and students were separated into one of three tracks, depending on abilities. There was the college-prep track, which I was in, the business track for those girls who planned to work as secretaries or in some form of clerical work, and the "basic" track for those girls who struggled academically. After graduation, many of the "basic" track students went directly to work in such establishments as the Boston Gas Company or the New England Telephone Company. Some of the students in the business track might attend a two year business school before landing an office job. The rest of us were primed for higher education.

In tenth grade we all took a battery of achievement tests which suggested academic and career options based on individual strengths. Our guidance counselor, Sr. Gail, invited each student into her office to discuss the results and to assist us in determining our future plans. "It's too bad you're not a boy!" "Why?" I asked. "Well, these tests indicate that you would be very successful as an architect or some kind of engineer. It's too bad. You would probably do well at some place like Wentworth Institute or an architecture school." And so it was, in the early 60s for many young women, our choices were limited to nursing, secretarial work, or teaching. It was years later that I realized that, had I been raised in a different socioeconomic setting, the choice to be an architect or engineer as a woman would have been quite possible. But, as the product of a lower economic background, I felt limited to those professions suitable for the working class in spite of numerous role models: two hard-work-

ing parents, peers who persevered in their academic achievements and teachers who were all white women.

At home, my parents encouraged me not only to pursue a college degree but also to pursue a field of my choice. They supported my efforts but, lacking a college experience themselves, they were ill-equipped to provide advice. I began undergraduate school with the intention of majoring in math. As a freshman, I recall seeking the advice of the chair of the math department, a middle-aged bachelor who responded with a perplexed look. "Why do you want to major in mathematics? That is a discipline for men!" I froze in my seat. I thought as chair of the program he would encourage me to move forward. Instead, I found myself lost in pursuit of a major that would be more suitable for a woman. In time I found my niche as a music major at the public university. Most of my professors were white men who had earned their doctorate degrees at Harvard University and Stanford and who encouraged me through the program. Nearing graduation I wondered what I would do with a bachelor's degree in music. My advisor recommended that I stay at the college one more year and become licensed to teach music. Again I was confronted with conflicting ideas. Of course I loved the idea of staying in school another year; college had been such a rewarding experience for me on many levels—academically and socially. But I never thought of myself as a teacher—I never liked teaching children. I found myself one year later teaching at one of the suburban high schools just outside Boston. I discovered that as much as I loved my discipline, I also had the right personality and skills for working with adolescents. I began teaching the next fall and have been teaching ever since.

This is the story of one first-generation college graduate, but things have changed for today's undergraduates who are the first in their families to attend college. The

following section focuses on current studies of first-generation college students, not only providing significant findings, but also providing the reader with practical suggestions for easing the transition for these newcomers into the world of higher education.

RECENT STUDIES

Byrd and MacDonald (2005) conducted a qualitative study of eight participants, all of whom were first-generation college students, to identify specific characteristics and skills relevant to college readiness. Based on data from interviews, journals and field notes, ten themes emerged which the researchers classified as college readiness skills and abilities, background factors, or student self-concept. Participants revealed four themes representing specific skills and abilities needed to succeed as first-generation college students: academic skills, time management skills, identification and focus on a goal, and ability to self-advocate. Academic skills included reading, writing, math, technology, communication, and study skills. Surprisingly, first-generation students indicated a greater need to arrive in college with reading skills than writing skills. Participants described having problems with vocabulary and realizing the amount of time required to complete reading requirements. Time management skills included balancing studying with work, family, activities and social life. Furthermore, data revealed the necessity to arrive at college having a goal and focusing efforts to achieve that goal. Finally, age and maturity contributed to the ability to speak up for one's needs and to seek help as necessary.

The researchers' (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005) discussion of background factors revealed four themes: family factors, career influences, financial concerns, and college preparation. Among family factors, partici-

pants indicated family expectations and experiences as direct influences on their decision to attend college, as well as the desire to do better than their parents, having witnessed how much their parents struggled economically. Work experiences and career aspirations also influenced this decision. Issues around finances suggest the need for first-generation college students to be aware of financial aid and scholarship opportunities. Advanced placement courses taken in high school were the only courses participants identified as helping prepare them for college.

In the last category, the researchers (Byrd & MacDonald, 2005) identified two themes: self-concept and college system. Older students, those who had attended community colleges prior to four year colleges or who took time to pursue possible careers, had more strength in self-concept, self-advocacy, goal focus, and time management than traditional students. The researchers felt non-traditional students were more prepared and ready for the college experience than they thought. Finally, participants indicated the need to understand the college system, college standards, and the culture of the college, and that lacking this knowledge put them at a disadvantage. As supportive as families were, they were not able to offer direction or advice because they themselves had not attended college.

In a longitudinal study of first-generation college students over a three year period, Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, and Terenzini (2004) determined a number of factors contributing to student learning and cognitive development. Discussion included the fact that first-generation college students lack the cultural and social capital necessary for making a smooth transition from secondary education. In spite of this, the researchers recognized that these students often acquire greater cultural and social capital than their peers who have one or both parents who were college graduates and who arrive at college with some guid-

ance and possible experiences contributing to cultural and social capital.

Findings were arranged in three categories: college experiences, college outcomes, and conditional effects (Pascarella et al., 2004). The first finding involving college experiences determined that first-generation college students exhibited significant deficit in their choice of college, whereas their peers had the guidance of their parents who were college graduates to advise them. Many first-generation college students held part-time jobs, often working more than 20 hours per week, completed fewer credit hours than their peers, were more likely to live off campus, and consequently, were less apt to become involved in extracurricular activities, clubs and organizations. Growing evidence suggested that extracurricular involvement and interaction with peers contribute to both intellectual and personal development during college (Pascarella et al., 2004).

In the area of college outcomes, researchers (Pascarella et al., 2004) found that over time and with persistence the gaps in writing skills, reading comprehension, critical thinking, and quantitative reasoning lessened between first-generation college students and their peers. Several additional findings were classified as conditional effects. Social and cultural capital acquired during college for first-generation college students resulted from their level of engagement with social and peer networks at the college. Furthermore, involvement in extracurricular activities had positive effects on critical thinking, plans for advanced degrees, self-confidence and control over academic success, and tasks involving higher order thinking. Researchers (Pascarella et al., 2004) found similar positive effects for first-generation college students involved in non-academic related interactions with peers on quantitative reasoning, writing skills, as well as future degree plans. Pascarella et al. concluded that social interaction with peers both

within and outside courses, along with extracurricular activities, contributed to gains in social and cultural capital, as well as academic advancements.

In a more recent study utilizing the *College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ)*, Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian, and Miller (2007) used a random sample of 4501 undergraduate students, an equal number of 643 students from seven racial and ethnic groups, to discover where students applied effort and what they learned from the college experience. The researchers conjectured that educational and social involvement of first-generation college students led to academic and personal gains and discovered that race and ethnicity had mostly positive effects on involvement. Lundberg et al. defined involvement as use of library, computers and other technologies, course learning, writing, faculty interactions, involvement in fine arts, clubs and organizations, personal experiences and peer interactions, science and quantitative experiences, and discussion of topics and integration of ideas. African American, Native American and some Hispanic students were less involved in campus experiences. Mexican American students were the only ethnic group with a positive effect on personal learning gains and were most likely to interact and to engage in discussions with students unlike themselves. Asian and Pacific Islander students needed encouragement to engage in public discourse; however, the researchers also speculated this could be a result of cultural appropriateness (Lundberg et al., 2007).

Similar to Lundberg et al. (2007), Pike and Kuh (2005) found successful gains for first-generation college students resulted from academic and social engagement and the college environment. First-generation students were less engaged and less likely to integrate diverse college experiences than peers whose parents were college graduates. Female and minority students who lived on campus were more likely to

be involved in college life and reported greater gains in their learning and intellectual development than other first-generation students who commuted (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Research suggests that colleges establish programs to assist first-generation college students adjust to college (Folger, Carter, & Chase, 2004; Gibbons & Shooner, 2004; Laden, 2004; Lundberg et al., 2007; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Summer enrichment programs led by peer groups on college campuses provide guidance to incoming first-generation students on how to manage academic and social demands and on the importance of building relationships with faculty (Folger et al., 2004; Gibbons & Shooner, 2004; Laden, 2004; Lundberg et al., 2007). Lundberg et al. (2007) detail specific recommendations for instituting summer programs that orientate first-generation students and regularly meet with the students throughout the academic year to discuss their progress and needs. Furthermore, the researchers suggest enlightening the teaching faculty on the specific needs of this population of students and how they can assist these students in such areas as class participation and peer collaboration.

Laden (2004) stated specific recommendations for colleges to assist racially diverse student populations in making successful transition to the culture of higher education.

- Colleges should acknowledge and integrate the culture and experiences diverse populations bring to the campus.
- Colleges should create inclusive, comprehensive techniques for curriculum, instructional practices and student services that support academic and social needs.

- Colleges should provide direction for first-generation college students to learn the college system and to make use of such resources as financial aid, writing and academic support services, tutoring services and peer assistance programs.
- Colleges should cultivate a system devoted to early detection of academic, financial, or other concerns that might stand in the way of success for first-generation students.
- Colleges should seek to hire administrators, faculty, and staff representative of the student demographics who could be role models, mentors and advisors.
- Finally, colleges should explore ways for the concerns, ideas, and views of this population to be heard and integrated as part of college life (Laden, 2004).

There are some similarities and some differences between the current group of first generation college students and my generation who were the first in their families to attend college—with race/ethnicity and language being the biggest differences. But, for those of us who teach today's college students, we must keep in mind "how it was" for us and give today's first generation college students the support and understanding they need in order to succeed academically and in their future endeavors.

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