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1

The Creation of the First Generation Student

COLLEGE HAS ALWAYS been viewed as a vehicle for opportunity and social mobility for talented students, regardless of background. Yet college, especially the most exclusive ones, can also seem to be a bastion of privilege. New evidence suggests that wealthy universities educate wealthy students, with many universities enrolling more students from the top one percent than they do from the bottom sixty percent.¹ What does the college experience look like for those who enter the most storied halls of what we might call “legacy” institutions without the family wealth and prior experience of many of its alumni? What does college do for those who enter its gates presumably carrying less privilege and with more to gain from attending such institutions than the well-off scions of college-educated parents?

1. See Chetty et al., “Mobility Report Cards.”

On the Creation of the First Generation College Student

The term “first generation college student” appears everywhere nowadays.² There are first generation college student centers and programs dedicated to establishing footholds for first generation students on college campuses across the country. First-in-the-family narratives embroider politicians’ stump speeches, university leaders’ commencement addresses, and memoirs of industry titans and sage professionals of all stripes. The deployment of a “first generation college” narrative harks to an ongoing cultural commitment to educational opportunity and higher education’s role in fulfilling the American Dream.³ As a nation, we are aspirationally committed to incorporating outsiders and newcomers, although we also recognize that we have a history of slamming doors and ousting parvenus. If first generation students have the

2. This term has been used with and without a hyphen. I have chosen not to use the hyphen in my own writing about first generation students, but the reader will note that the hyphenated use, “first-generation,” will appear in direct quotes from scholars who deploy the hyphen.

3. At the outset of Karabel’s *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, a landmark study of selective admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, Karabel emphasizes a tension between two divergent ideas on what is fair in educational practice: one seeks “equality of opportunity,” or essentially a meritocratic system that awards the best prepared students with the best possible education; and another seeks “equality of conditions,” or a system that shares educational goods among students with varying levels of academic mastery and diverse academic interests. Karabel’s history of selective admissions tells the story of how “equality of opportunity” became the dominant path chosen by the most prestigious colleges and universities in the twentieth century, and the social ramifications of that path—some positive and others negative—for ethnic minorities, the urban and rural poor, and women. For excellent reviews of the concept of merit in the United States and its relationship to higher education, see Kett, *Merit: The History of a Founding Ideal*; Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*; and Menand, “Why We Have College” and “The Graduates.” Finally, for critiques of the concept of meritocracy in elite admissions, see Guinier, *Tyranny of the Meritocracy*; and Warikoo, *Diversity Bargain*.

opportunity to succeed and do so on par with their peers who come from families where college is already a part of life, then their success indicates that higher education is meeting its goal to enable opportunity, however imperfectly. This is perhaps even more potentially salutary on an elite college campus, the presumed proving ground of future professional, academic, and industry leaders, and populated largely by the children of America's economic upper and upper-middle classes. First generation college students who attend our nation's "legacy" institutions are poised to offer crucial insights into the opportunities and challenges of deploying education as a primary path to mobility and social change. But who are the first generation students who attend America's top institutions, and what do they want their campus leaders to know about them and do to help them achieve their educational and personal goals?

The answer to the first question—*who are they?*—can be difficult to parse. First generation college students are commonly defined as the first in their family to attend a four-year college.⁴ By entering college, they are engaging in a vocational path that is potentially distinct from that of their parents. As such, they are presumed unable to rely on their parents' experiential knowledge to aid their college-going choices, but beyond this commonality, they comprise a heterogeneous group. In her qualitative study of first generation college students at an elite liberal arts college, sociologist Tina Wildhagen remarks on the rising interest in the category "first generation" beginning in the early 2000s, just as the actual rate of first generation college students reached a nadir.⁵ She

4. Most universities and foundations follow Susan Choy's 2001 definition for the National Center for Education Statistics: the student with neither parent having attained a bachelor's degree. See Choy, *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College*, 1–34.

5. Wildhagen, "Not Your Typical Student'." Wildhagen, quoting prior research, contends that at the same time that the interest in first generation college students spiked among administrators, beginning in the early 2000s, the actual numbers of first generation college students plummeted from thirty-nine percent in 1971 to sixteen

points out, as do other scholars,⁶ that the categorization of first generation college students, while potentially useful for admissions offices and university leaders, does not always sit well with the students it intends to describe. These students constitute multiple social class, ethnic, and racial categories, are native and non-native born, and arrive in college with varied high school experiences. They are equally as likely to consider their first generation status as nonessential to who they are and what they intend for their futures as they are to be invested in expressing a first generation identity. Those who self-identify as first generation college students by joining first generation student groups or disclosing this status to their peers do not always represent the heterogeneity and multiple interests of those who fit the status. Moreover, personal identification with the status changes over time and based on context: who is asking and why they are asking it shapes the choice to disclose as much as the individual's personal commitment to the category.

In prior decades, the term “first generation” referred to the pioneering group of students who integrated a school: one would read about “the first generation” of African American or female students to gain access to colleges that previously barred their entry. The fact that a student's parents may not have attended college appeared less salient than other categories. Terms such as “scholarship boy,” “low-income student,” or “minority student” served to shape research questions about outsider or newcomer status, particularly in exclusive or unequal collegiate settings.⁷

percent in 2005. See Victor Saenz, Sylvia Hurtado, Doug Barrera, De'Sha Wolf, and Fanny Yeung, *First in My Family: A Profile of First-Generation College Students at Four-Year Institutions Since 1971* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 2007).

6. See Thai-Huy Nguyen and Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen, “Is the ‘First-Generation Student’ Term Useful for Understanding Inequality? The Role of Intersectionality in Illuminating the Implications of an Accepted—Yet Unchallenged—Term,” *Review of Research in Higher Education* 42 (March 2018): 146–76.

7. For examples, see Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Washington: Essential Books, 1957) and Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*. For in-depth historical accounts of

Memoirs by journalists and academics who dealt with divided loyalties between home and college, or the cleft habitus resulting from social migration—for instance, Alfred Lubrano’s sensitive portrait in *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*—offered intimate truths regarding those who were the first in their family to attend college.⁸ Current researchers are still very much invested in questions about how race, social class, and gender influence the unequal experiences and outcomes of education for students.⁹ They are also concerned with how schools might overcome these inequities. It has only been within the past twenty years that the additional category of first generation college student has become a salient topic of research. However, rather than reflecting an identity feature, this categorization signals a status in flux: once the first generation student graduates from college, the relevance of this status recedes.

The second question—*what do they want their campus leaders to know about them and do to help them achieve their educational and personal goals?*—is the focus of this book. The vast majority of first generation college students in the United States today attend less selective institutions, and their primary goals are to graduate and find meaningful, well-paid work.¹⁰ Administrators at such schools

how the language of access and assistance (regarding financial aid and other tools) in elite higher education changed over time, see Cary, “Tradition and Transition”; Karabel, *Chosen*; and Keller and Keller, *Making Harvard Modern*.

8. Lubrano, *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*. *Cleft habitus* is a term deployed by Pierre Bourdieu in his extensive analyses of the personal effects of social mobility, including dis-ease in both old and new contexts. See Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* and *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*.

9. For just a few excellent recent examples not addressed in other places in this book, see Stuber, “Talk of Class”; Stuber, Klugman, and Daniel, “Gender, Social Class and Exclusion”; Mullen, *Degrees of Inequality*; Harper, “Black Male College Achievers” and “Am I My Brother’s Teacher?”

10. Research comparing first and continuing generation student outcomes from a national perspective are important for understanding the baseline differences in these two groups of college-goers. Examples of this quantitative work include Engle

evaluate success or failure of the programs they implement by measuring how well first generation students do in comparison to their continuing generation peers.¹¹ First generation students who attend elite colleges graduate at very high rates and ultimately find remunerative work at rates equal to their continuing generation peers.¹² So the question is not whether they graduate, but rather, whether they are afforded with the opportunities to thrive and achieve the goals they establish for themselves in college and beyond. Does their attendance at an elite institution provide them with the opportunities and pathways they anticipated when they first elected to attend, or that they established through the course of college? If so, what does that process look like? And what does it mean to the students themselves?

Elite colleges and universities have recently launched initiatives to attenuate or entirely remove barriers to access for low-income

and Tinto, *Moving beyond Access*; Terenzini et al., “First-Generation College Students”; Warburton, Bugarin, and Nuñez, “Bridging the Gap”; Pike and Kuh, “First- and Second-Generation College Students”; and Jenkins, Miyazaki, and Janosik, “Predictors that Distinguish First-Generation College Students from Non-First Generation College Students.” See also Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line* for an outstanding and detailed analysis of public university graduation rates based on race, gender, parental education, high school grades, test scores, and the selectivity of the university.

11. One recent national study indicated that the national average graduation rate for first generation college students was around 27.4 percent in the first decade of the twenty-first century, compared to 42.1 percent for students with college-graduate parents. See DeAngelo et al., *Completing College*, 9.

12. Graduation rates among first generation students at Harvard were ninety-six percent and at Georgetown were ninety-four percent during the time of this study, while their overall graduation rates at these institutions were only a fraction higher. Two years after the participants in this study graduated, I was able to verify the employment or graduate attendance of approximately ninety percent of the first and continuing generation participants, with approximately equal employment rates and comparable sectors of employment among both groups. Most recent graduates were launched into careers or graduate preparation in the fields they described as their early career goals during senior interviews, with the modal employer category for both first and continuing generation as the corporate or financial industries.

students, many of whom would be first generation college students. These efforts include eliminating financial obstacles, as well as sending a message to low-income and first generation students that they can achieve success at an elite college and feel like they belong there. Likewise, administrators and dedicated alumni have focused on addressing first generation student transition to college through a variety of outlets. Among these are first generation student programs, funds, and alumni mentorship initiatives as well as retooled academic advising and training for residential and advising staff.

In short, the experiences of first generation students (many, though certainly not all, of whom are also from low-income backgrounds) attending highly selective colleges offer insights into the mechanisms of social mobility through educational attainment. They also provide a test of social reproduction: are certain doors open or closed to first generation students because of their birth origins or parental influence? Studying the social and vocational pathways that students take after they arrive on campus, and the opportunities afforded them while in college and upon graduation, will help scholars to discern whether and under what conditions social reproduction occurs despite institutional efforts to maximize the potential of social mobility for all students.

I explore the questions above through the stories and insights of ninety-one first generation college students and thirty-five of their continuing generation peers attending Harvard and Georgetown University between 2012 and 2016. The participants, who entered college in the fall of 2011 or 2012, comprise a diverse range in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, birthplace origin, cultural/regional upbringing, and high school experiences. These students, 126 in all, spoke of their transition to and progress through college, including their highs and lows, challenges and accomplishments, over the course of four years. Interviewed first as sophomores and again as seniors, they explained how they changed over time and, in many instances, took the opportunity to revise earlier assessments of their college experiences. By asking the same battery of

questions to both first generation and continuing generation students, I have been able to draw comparisons and note differences in the reported college-going experiences between the two samples. A demographic breakdown of the first and continuing generation participants can be found in table A.3 in the *Appendix*. The *Appendix* also provides further details concerning the initial goals of the study upon which this book is based, researcher roles and involvement, participant recruitment, data collection, interview analyses, and the iterative process of reporting and reanalysis.

It is often assumed that there is a fundamental difference in college-going between first and continuing generation students. Instead of beginning with this assumption, this book tests that assumption, and where appropriate, clarifies what differences do exist and whether they are differences of degree or kind. Also, first generation student identity and experiences tend to be treated as monolithic by higher education researchers,¹³ but I found notable variation in the extent to which first generation students self-identified as such, as well as the degree to which they believed their first generation status impacted their experiences in college. This book traces the variability of the first generation experience in order to identify conditions that foster successful outcomes.

It is not inconsequential that these participants attended an elite university. By undergoing the admissions and enrollment process, they have indicated their ability and willingness to compete at very high levels of academic rigor. Most of the participants in this study were valedictorians, salutatorians, and top extracurricular competitors in their high schools. They have traveled, sometimes

13. Wildhagen advocates against a “monolithic” categorization of first generation students in “Not Your Typical Student.” See also Thai-Huy Nguyen and Bach Mai Dolly Nguyen, “Is the ‘First-Generation Student’ Term Useful for Understanding Inequality? The Role of Intersectionality in Illuminating the Implications of an Accepted—Yet Unchallenged—Term,” *Review of Research in Higher Education* 42 (March 2018): 146–76. Recent comparative higher education scholarship critiques the tendency toward monolithic student categories. For excellent examples, see Jack, *Privileged Poor* and Lee, *Class and Campus Life*.

great distances, both physically and psychologically from their homes and communities. And by attending an elite university with a significant endowment, they have been afforded opportunities—internships, laboratory research, study abroad, and fellowships—that they might not otherwise secure or that may not be as readily available at less endowed or less selective colleges.

There are also perceived risks to enrolling in an elite college, especially one that may be characterized as a “legacy” institution due to its history, character, and endowment. Some first generation students, especially those from high schools with fewer advanced course offerings, may arrive feeling less prepared for college than their peers. They may worry about their “fit” with the university, or that they may not “catch up” to their better prepared peers. They may feel conflicted about the friends and family they left at home, or have trouble balancing the expectations from home and school. They might face financial pressures that their continuing generation peers seem not to have, thereby exacerbating the perceived difference between themselves and the “typical” elite college student. This study asks whether and under what conditions these issues are raised by first generation students, and details, given their responses and suggestions, what policies may be implemented to maximize a sense of belonging and fit.

The contemporary social context of the term “first generation” is a factor in this study. The term “first generation” was not widely deployed in higher education research or used as a classification in university recruitment until the early 2000s, a period that coincides with a decline in first-generation college attendance rates from thirty-nine percent at their peak in the early 1970s to under fifteen percent in the early 2000s. The effort to recruit and retain high achieving first generation students at elite universities speaks to their desire to provide opportunities to qualified students regardless of background and their fear that many qualified students are “under-matching” or not attending college at all.¹⁴

14. On the perils of “under-matching,” see Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson, *Crossing the Finish Line*.

At Harvard, the active recruitment of first generation students can be traced to former university president Lawrence Summers's launch of the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative (HFAI) in 2004. The financial aid initiative was designed to support students from low- and middle-income families who might not otherwise consider Harvard because they assumed it was financially out of reach. It simplified the financial aid process by eliminating the student loan requirement and the parental contribution expectation for families under a set income threshold. Originally, families with an annual income under \$40,000 were expected to pay nothing toward their children's tuition; that threshold has risen over the years to its current \$65,000 income threshold. Currently, families that earn between \$65,000 and \$150,000 are expected to contribute up to ten percent of their household income toward tuition. The intended message from HFAI is simple: "Anyone can afford Harvard."¹⁵

However, first generation students are not necessarily low-income students, and low-income students are not always the first in their family to graduate from college. At Harvard, the active recruitment and enrollment of low-income students involves current students and alumni telling the stories of their Harvard experience. For some, this included a narrative of being first in the family to attend college. For instance, during the freshman orientation program known as "Opening Days," one reading assignment included an essay by alumnus David Tebaldi titled "Choosing the Color of My Collar," concerning one first generation student's experiences attending Harvard after the implementation of HFAI. However, this author's focus was primarily concerned with social class differences on campus, not the experience of being first generation, *per se*.

More open discussion about what it means to be a first generation college student, or "first gen," began at Harvard with the cre-

15. Harvard College Griffin Financial Aid Office website, <https://college.harvard.edu/financial-aid/how-aid-works/harvard-financial-aid-initiative>, accessed June 16, 2019.

ation of a first generation alumni special interest group in 2012 and a first generation student organization in 2013. Since the inauguration of these two organizations by the dedicated students and alumni who launched and expanded them, coupled with the efforts of the university to support and publicly discuss first generation experiences and challenges at Harvard, the term has become more of a fixture in the discussion of diversity and inclusion on campus.

At Georgetown, the development of the first generation category also began in the early 2000s with a fundraising effort to increase financial aid and replace loans with grant packages for high-achieving, low-income recruits. Upon the conclusion of a major capital campaign in 2003, the Georgetown Offices of Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid created the 1789 Scholarship and its attendant Georgetown Scholarship Program (GSP). Students who receive the 1789 Scholarship are automatically invited into the GSP, a financial aid and program support office.¹⁶ The GSP specifically targeted first generation college students and has evolved considerably since its inception in 2004. It hosts a variety of programs throughout the year, as well as provides mentorship and leadership opportunities, emergency funds, and other financial resources for its members. The GSP has become an integral part of the larger Georgetown community, standing alongside other well-established programs such as the Community Scholars Program (a.k.a. “Community Scholars”), a rigorous summer transition program originally dedicated to supporting students from the DC public school system, and the Center for Multicultural Equity and Access, which hosts Community Scholars and seeks to increase racial and economic diversity and inclusion on campus.

Harvard and Georgetown are just two among scores of highly selective colleges and universities that have implemented dedicated support systems and programs for first generation students

16. The Georgetown Scholarship Program website may be found here: <https://gsp.georgetown.edu/>

over the past decade.¹⁷ Their activities undoubtedly affect how first generation students experience and evaluate their time in college. This study assumes that the experiences of first generation students attending Harvard and Georgetown were in part due to the evolution of such programs. It also assumes that national trends in student affairs and student social networks affect how students evaluate their experiences on campus, often based on their understanding of what transpires among their peers on similar campuses across the nation. In short, context matters: both the institutional context at the two institutions of this study and the national context in which “first generation” is fast becoming a commonly understood category for the college-bound.

17. National organizations such as the I’m First! Campaign provide extensive resources for students who would be the first in their family to attend college. Access their website here: <https://imfirst.org/>

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