



NEW IN CLASS: FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS AND THE UNSEEN COSTS OF COLLEGE

First-generation college students are different from other students in many ways, but especially because their parents and other family members do not have experience navigating college and its expectations.

First-generation students enter college without important information about what to expect both academically and socially, and they often have different ideas about why people go to college than most middle-class students do. These differences matter because most four-year universities are designed for white upper-middle-class students.

When people talk about the experiences of first-generation students, they often focus on their financial struggles, and these are a critical part of the puzzle. Recently, the media shed light on widespread hunger among undergraduate students. First-generation students are more likely to be food insecure and to have a job than other students, and are more likely to send money home to support their families. These economic constraints make college more difficult both academically and socially. It is harder to take the courses you need if you cannot register on time because your tuition is late and the courses you want are full. This problem alone can cause first-generation students to take longer to graduate. Working long hours can also impact academic performance. Socially, financial constraints can be devastating, as more affluent students expect first-generation students to participate in costly activities, treat first-generation students as boring or uptight if they worry too much about money, or mark them as outsiders because they do not have the right fashion.

These social dynamics, I found in my research, have a bigger impact on women's friendships than on men's. I elaborate on these differences further below. Financial problems are

not the only obstacles first-generation students face, however. First-generation students also amass a number of unseen emotional and psychological costs as they navigate the collegiate landscape.

When I decided to include white first-generation college students in my comparative study of minoritized students (which also examines the experiences of Black and lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer students), I imagined that first-generation would be a proxy for working class, and usually it is. But as I have come to learn, it is a broad term that encompasses students with a wide range of precollegiate experiences, and it is important to be mindful of this variation when we talk about first-generation students. The white first-generation students who matriculated to the university in my study tended to be relatively advantaged compared with students who do not attend college and compared with students who matriculated to more regional universities. They are also different in some ways from first-generation students of color.

Unlike many first-generation students, the students in my study did not have to send money home. Some had significant scholarships. None reported being hungry. Class dynamics were nonetheless a significant, often pernicious, dimension of their experiences. Yet, the first-generation students in my study did not, for the most part, see themselves as a class-disadvantaged group and did not think about most of their experiences through the lens of class. Thus, they did not connect with each other as a status group

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with shared experiences. Instead, they saw the patterned struggles they experienced as personal, and first-generation women in particular blamed themselves.

White first-generation students shared a set of symbolic and cultural assumptions, expectations, and practices that were at odds with the predominant campus population, independent of specific financial situations. These students said their parents neither encouraged nor discouraged their pursuit of college. For example, Brendan recalled: “They always told me, you know, whatever you end up wanting to do, we’ll support that. So it’s not like they were really trying to push me in any one way or the other.” Similarly, these students said their parents did not understand the college-going process, and consequently did not and could not provide them with any college-going knowledge or support. Their parents’ lack of knowledge about college mattered a lot. Not only did it make it impossible for first-generation students to turn to their parents for guidance or emotional support, but it also meant their parents sometimes encouraged them to make decisions that would undermine their collegiate paths. Consequently, first-generation students saw themselves as more independent, self-motivated, and mature than their class-privileged peers, who they believed just did what their

parents wanted, and these self-evaluations provided them with a source of self-worth.

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In *Inside the College Gates*, Jenny Stuber (2011) argues that cultural differences in collegiate expectations influence social integration for first-generation students at four-year, predominantly upper-middle-class institutions. Unlike their class-privileged peers, first-generation students are less likely to come to college primed for sociability, which is characterized by wide-ranging social ties, partying, and extracurricular activities, and more likely to see coursework and a few close friendships as meaningful. I found that both men and women were unprepared for the culture of partying, but that the women found it much harder to adjust and to find alternative pathways to social integration. The first-generation men in my research were able to opt out of partying by making friends through low-cost alternatives such as playing Frisbee on the quad, pickup basketball in the rec center, or hiking. They were also able to cultivate identities as hard workers. To do this successfully, these men had to adjust their emotions, adopting the local culture of positivity and wellness as their own, and ignoring class disparities between themselves and other students as irrelevant to their life chances.

The women in my study, however, had a much harder time finding low-cost activities to generate friendships, developing identities based on hard work, and opting out of partying. Instead, they keenly felt the weight of women’s expectations and judgment. Spring’s unchill reaction to her hard-partying roommate earned her a reputation as boring and left her friendless. Another student, Grace, recalled: “I was friends with this girl, she was from New Jersey, and she had old money. And we did well for a semester, but then I realized I felt like a puppy trying to follow her around. And, like, still have all the fashion and everything.” Her friend set the parameters and pace of consumption, determining what counted as stylish and worth purchasing, and Grace’s participation in the friendship seemed to depend on her willingness to participate on these terms. Grace soon tired of their unequal arrangement, and their friendship fell apart. Grace decided that college friendships were too much emotional work, and she opted out of them altogether, a common pattern among the first-generation women I interviewed. Natalie commented, “I’m like, ‘I can’t go to that ’cause I can’t afford it.’ And they’re just like, ‘Well, just have your parents pay for it.’ Like, they don’t understand that that’s not something I can do. So there’s just this gap in understanding.” Janelle lost her initial set of friends because she was shocked by their partying and they viewed her responses as uptight. Janelle described at length

the efforts she put into trying to find ways to accommodate her more recent friends' spending expectations: "So I've gotten better at it, but I think my friends feel like, 'God, she really holds us back sometimes.'"

First-generation women spoke repeatedly about the ways their college peers expected them to accommodate their class-privileged spending habits rather than the reverse, and the emotional toll this took on them. First-generation women faced a constellation of gender and class obstacles: they didn't understand expectations around partying and they consequently reacted the wrong way. They didn't have the money or the cultural knowledge to keep up with expectations around women's consumption or sociability. And they were expected to not only participate on the terms of their more affluent peers, but also to control their emotions in such a way that they never expressed distress. In other words, they were supposed to be chill, or to embody what sociologist Shamus Khan, who examines the reproduction of privilege at St. Paul's School, has called ease. The failure to do any of these things marked them as prudish

or boring or both, and pushed them out of social networks, leaving them isolated and not understanding what went wrong.

For both white first-generation men and women, making it through four-year universities came with significant identity challenges. Both groups were expected to adapt to the upper-middle-class culture of the campus by adopting the predominant worldview and downplaying class-based mistreatment. Neither group saw class as the basis for solidarity, community, or common ground with other minoritized students on campus. In my research, the challenges were steeper for women, because gendered class expectations were less forgiving. Campus culture provided more flexibility to white men than to white women, allowing them a wider range of activities and pathways to integration. The inflexibility of the campus culture for white women, in contrast, left most white first-generation women isolated and without clear ways to gain the important benefits of college, which include thick social networks and the opportunities such networks provide.

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