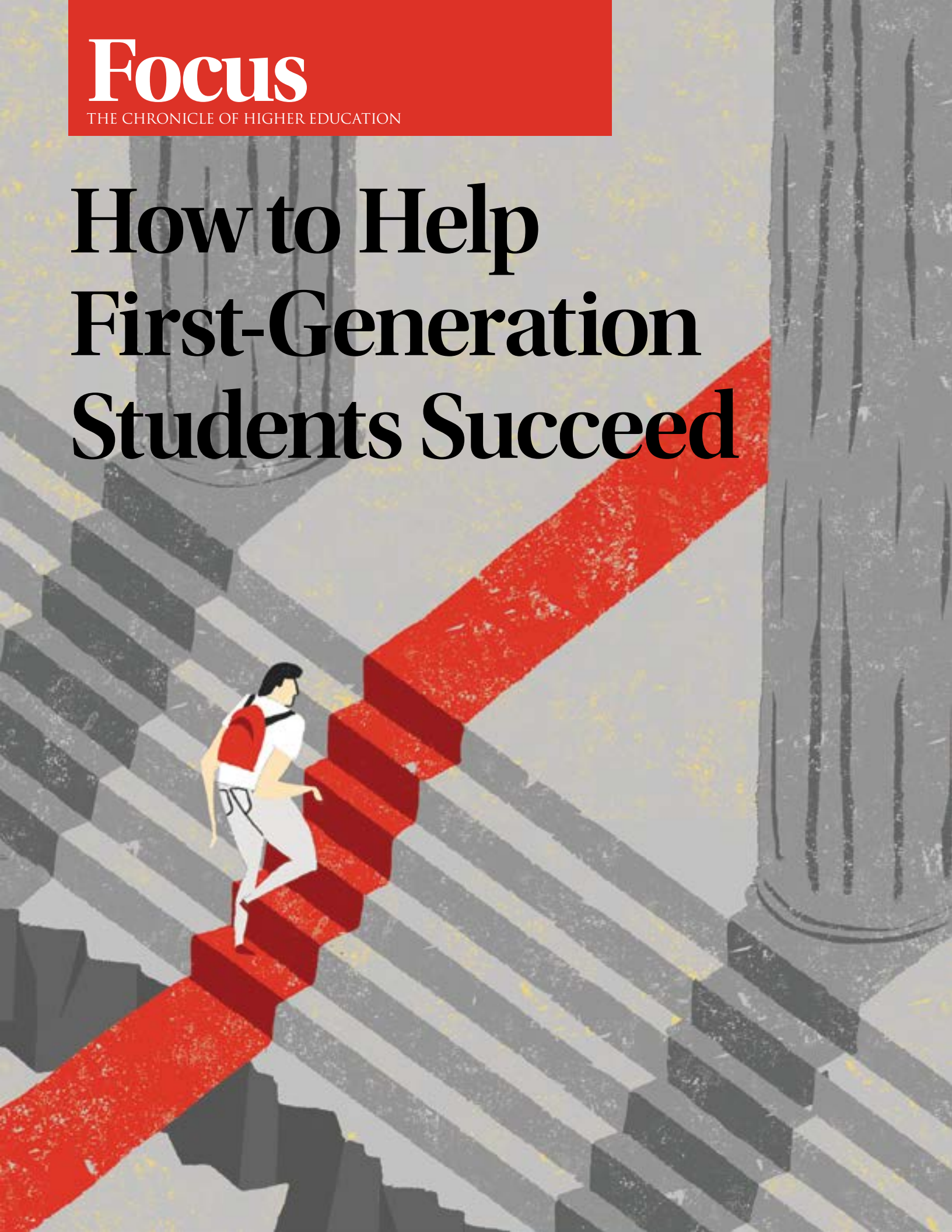


# Focus

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

# How to Help First-Generation Students Succeed



# As a Chronicle of Higher Education individual subscriber,

you receive premium, unrestricted access to the entire Chronicle Focus collection. Curated by our newsroom, these booklets compile the most popular and relevant higher-education news to provide you with in-depth looks at topics affecting campuses today. The Chronicle Focus collection explores student alcohol abuse, racial tension on campuses, and other emerging trends that have a significant impact on higher education.

**B**EWILDERMENT about how to navigate the college experience hits first-generation students harder than it does others. Such students face significant financial, cultural, and educational barriers. Yet they enroll in college in significant numbers, with about a quarter of new freshmen reporting that their parents had no postsecondary education. The articles in this collection examine colleges' strategies for helping those students adjust and excel.

**4** **The Challenge of the First-Generation Student**

Some colleges have amped up efforts to retain such students, but hurdles remain.

**8** **Princeton Strives to Help First-Generation Students Feel More at Home**

The university introduces those students to campus with a Freshman Scholars Institute.

**12** **'I Fit in Neither Place'**

The cultural challenges of first-generation students can linger even after they become faculty members.

**15** **Micro-Barriers Loom Large for First-Generation Students**

The author of *Hillbilly Elegy* demonstrates how cultural differences affect access.

**17** **Here's Smarty-Pants, Home for the Holidays**

First-generation students pursuing graduate degrees may encounter family skepticism.

**20** **10 'Best Practices' for Serving First-Generation Students**

The Council of Independent Colleges drew up a list based on 50 colleges' experiences.

**21** **Campus Child Care, a 'Critical Student Benefit,' Is Disappearing**

Availability can make or break the educational dreams of community-college students.

**25** **Let's Help First-Generation Students Succeed**

Too often, colleges take their tuition money, then leave them floundering.

**27** **Singing the First-Generation Blues**

For students for whom college is a portal from one social class to another, the transition can be rough.

**30** **Elite Colleges and the Language of Class**

Colleges that welcome low-income first-generation students also delegitimize them.

Cover illustration by Jason Greenberg for *The Chronicle*



ANH VIET

Tae-Hyun Sakong migrated from South Korea at age 7 and today majors in neuroscience at Trinity U. His life is a world apart from that of his parents, neither of whom attended college. "I would kill to be able to explain to them what I do," he says.

# The Challenge of the First-Generation Student

Colleges amp up efforts to retain them, but hurdles remain

By KATHERINE MANGAN

**T**AE-HYUN SAKONG would love to be able to tell his parents why he decided to major in neuroscience, and what it was like to help his biology professor probe a genetic risk factor for Alzheimer's disease. The Trinity University undergraduate also wishes he could tell them about the anxiety and depression that overwhelm him when he compares himself with classmates who attended elite prep schools and spend spring breaks in Cancun. But his parents, who never went to college, speak little English, and he speaks his native Korean at a grade-school level. "I would kill to be able to explain to them what I do," he says.



Michael Soto, an associate professor of English at Trinity, understands. A first-generation college student himself, he grew up in Brownsville, Tex., on the border with Mexico. His parents couldn't understand why he decided to pursue a doctorate in English after graduating from Stanford.

"It was probably four years into graduate school that my mom finally stopped asking me when I was going to go to law school," he says.

The support Mr. Soto received as an undergraduate prompted him to become a champion for first-generation students, who now represent about 15 percent of Trinity's undergraduate population.

Mr. Sakong, 22, says that if it weren't for professors like Mr. Soto and James Roberts, his biology professor and adviser, he would have dropped out long ago.

As colleges seek to diversify their student bodies and patch up their leaky pipelines for disadvantaged students, many are expanding efforts to connect students who are the first in their families to attend college with supportive classmates, advisers, and professors. Some colleges have formal, longstanding programs in place, while others offer scholarships or informal support groups. But despite the fact that a growing number of first-generation college students are arriving on their doorsteps, many other colleges are doing little to meet their needs, either because they have trouble identifying such students or because their budgets are strained.

The challenges these students face are daunting. First-generation students tend to work longer hours at their jobs, are less likely to live on campus, and are more likely to have parents who would struggle to complete financial-aid forms. They're also more likely to arrive academically unprepared for the rigors of college and to require remediation before they can start earning college credit.

Many feel the tug of family responsibilities, rushing home after class to take care of younger siblings or missing classes to care for an ailing grandparent.

The disparity in household income is striking: Median family income at two- and four-year institutions for freshmen whose parents didn't attend college was \$37,565 last year, compared with \$99,635 for those whose parents did. *The New York Times* calculated those figures using data from the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Having lived so close to the margins, "first-generation students tend to be risk-averse," says Thomas G. Mortenson, a senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.

"Many of them continue being breadwinners for their families when they go off to college."

**C**LEARLY, these students need extra support to stay enrolled, and colleges have a strong interest in identifying their most vulnerable groups to keep them from dropping out. But identifying first-generation students isn't as easy as it sounds.

Colleges usually have to rely on self-reporting, since the Census Bureau no longer tracks parents' education attainment. The Common Application, like many colleges' own applications, asks students about the highest level of education their parents achieved. More than 28 percent of the 800,000 students who used the Common Application last year reported that they were first-generation students. They represent a diverse swath of society. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where about one in five undergraduates is a first-generation student, about 90 percent are white, many from small towns and farms.

Then there's the whole issue of whom to include. Some colleges use the first-generation designation when neither of the student's parents attended college. Others define it more narrowly to mean that neither parent graduated from college, or from a four-year college in the United States. That definition, used for eligibility in some federal-aid programs, would consider the daughter of two community-college graduates a first-generation college student.

However you define them, first-generation students represent a significant share of the prospective students that colleges, eager to trumpet their track records in diversifying their enrollments, are trying to recruit.

Of students who entered four-year colleges as freshmen last year, more than 45 percent reported that their fathers had no college degree of any kind, and 42 percent said their mothers lacked degrees, a survey found. About a quarter of their parents had no postsecondary education, according to the survey by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

The Council of Independent Colleges concluded in a report released earlier this year that small and midsize colleges, with their small classes, involved faculty members, and extracurricular activities, do the best job retaining low-income and first-generation students. The students are more likely to finish their bachelor's degrees in four years at a smaller private college than they are in six years at a public nondoctoral university, the researchers found.

Despite the higher sticker prices at small private colleges, first-generation students who attend them pay on average only \$1,000 more per year than do similar students at public research universities, mostly because of more generous scholarships, the report found.

Smith College is a case in point. Seventeen percent of its undergraduate students have parents

who didn't graduate from college, and it is among the institutions that offer generous perks to qualified first-generation students. Last month, at a campus event for newly accepted students, faculty and staff members who were themselves the first in their families to attend college wore T-shirts proclaiming their first-generation status.

Among them was the college's president, Kathleen McCartney.

"I want them to know that I was once a first-generation college student and that they should set their aspirations as high as they want to," she says. While first-generation students tend to feel pressure to emerge from college with a clear career path, "I want them to know that if they want to major in philosophy, they should major in philosophy," she says. She tells students that employers value strong liberal-arts backgrounds.

**W**HEN ELITE INSTITUTIONS like Smith, Amherst College, or Harvard University enroll significant numbers of first-generation students, their stories are often splashed across the news. But regional state universities and community colleges have been identifying and supporting these students for decades, through federal TRIO programs, a collection of outreach

and student-services efforts geared toward low-income students.

"We have seen this trend of elite colleges and universities that are well endowed actively and aggressively recruiting low-income, first-generation students," says James T. Minor, deputy assistant secretary for higher-education programs at the U.S. Department of Education.

"They tend to be high-achieving students, and we think that's wonderful," he adds. "But that, unfortunately, is not the majority of students from that demographic." He believes the overwhelming majority of first-generation students attend community colleges and open-access four-year public colleges, many of which, he says, have benefited from 50 years of TRIO-funded programs.

Some examples include a "talent search" program that allows colleges to offer intensive preparation for students at underserved schools and the McNair Scholars Program, which encourages first-generation and other underrepresented college students like Trinity's Mr. Sakong to pursue doctoral study.

California State University-Dominguez Hills is a largely minority campus in Los Angeles's South Bay where more than 60 percent of freshmen are the first in their immediate families to attend col-



SMITH COLLEGE

Kathleen McCartney (right), president of Smith College, and Debra Shaver, dean of admission, were themselves the first members of their families to attend college.

lege. The university offers a TRIO-funded support program for first-generation and low-income students that includes academic coaching, tutoring, peer mentoring, financial-literacy training, and graduate-school preparation.

“Everyone always asks, Is the student ready for college? But we also ask, Is the university ready for the student?” says William Franklin, interim vice president of enrollment management and student affairs. He was a first-generation student himself who graduated from the University of Southern California after being recruited by USC and a TRIO program called Upward Bound.

“We need to ensure that we work closely with parents,” he said, “and that first-generation students know how to navigate this place when they may not have a parent or sibling to talk to about financial aid, housing, or adding and dropping classes.”

A number of public universities have designated scholarships for first-generation students, but many are deterred by the extra cost of intensive advising and financial support the students typically require.

“The budget pressures that all higher education is under have four-year state institutions, particularly flagships, looking more carefully at the revenue potential of those they enroll,” says Mr. Mortenson of the Pell Institute. According to that metric, foreign and out-of-state students who pay full freight are the most valuable, while, he says, “the lowest priority are the lowest-income students who require an institutional discount.”

Those students, though, make up a sizable chunk of the total prospective student population, and many colleges have concluded that they’re worth investing in.

**T**O HELP STUDENTS who are most likely to fall through the cracks, a nonprofit group called the College Advising Corps this year placed about 450 recent college graduates of its 23 partner colleges into more than 500 underserved high

schools in 14 states. The new graduates serve as full-time college advisers, supplementing the work of professional college advisers who, on average, are responsible for 450 students (and up to 1,000 or more in states like California), according to Nicole Hurd, founder and chief executive of the advising group.

About 70 percent of the corps’s young advisers are from underrepresented minority groups, and more than half have parents who never graduated from college.

An analysis of the program by Stanford University found that high-school seniors who met with an adviser were 30 percent more likely to apply to college, 24 percent more likely to be accepted by at least one, and 26 percent more likely to submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or Fafsa.

And despite their disadvantaged economic status, three quarters of the students who enrolled in college persisted through the second year — about the same as the national average.

A spokesman for the advising group said it doesn’t yet have comparative graduation rates, but it hopes to start tracking them soon.

One of those advisers, Erica R. Elder, returned to her high school in Bassett, Va., to provide the kind of boost that helped get her into the University of Virginia.

The challenges she has faced as an adviser remind her of her own struggles while applying to college.

She has encountered students who didn’t see college as a realistic option, and who were ready to give up with any minor setback in the admissions process. Parents who were ashamed about their meager earnings and ignorance about college wouldn’t look her in the eye during financial-aid nights.

But when acceptances started rolling in for students she has advised, she would arrive at school at 8 a.m. to find two or three students ready to greet her. “When they come bursting into my office,” she says, “it’s the best feeling in the world.”

*Originally published on May 18, 2015*



# Princeton Strives to Help First-Generation Students Feel More at Home

By BECKIE SUPIANO

**V**ICTORIA DAVIDJOHN didn't realize that she was elite-college material until she attended a summer program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology before her senior year of high school, setting off a whirlwind application process.

So getting into Princeton University was "validating" and "joyful," Ms. Davidjohn said, but at the same time, "there's a huge amount of fear."

Ms. Davidjohn grew up in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and learned English after moving to Lynch-

burg, Va., in 2008. She is no stranger to culture shock.

Despite her excitement about Princeton, she felt unprepared. So when she received an invitation to attend the Freshman Scholars Institute, which brings selected first-generation and low-income students to the campus for an academic and social introduction to Princeton, Ms. Davidjohn did not hesitate to say yes.

During the institute last summer, Ms. Davidjohn bonded with other incoming students who

MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

**Khristina Gonzalez (left) and Nimisha Barton run Princeton's Freshman Scholars Institute, a program that seeks to provide first-generation and low-income students with the support system they might lack.**





were just as nervous about starting at Princeton as she was.

She also found her way around the campus before most of her new classmates arrived, putting her in a position to give a fellow freshman directions during orientation. “I felt like I belonged,” she said.

Now a rising sophomore, she plans to help out with this year’s institute, which starts on Saturday and runs through September 2.

While helping first-generation and low-income students succeed is a rallying cry across higher education, the challenge plays out differently at elite colleges, where they tend to make up a smaller share of the student body and where sizable numbers of their classmates come from tremendous privilege. And it may be especially acute at Princeton. After all, two prominent alumnae — the first lady, Michelle Obama, and the Supreme Court justice Sonia M. Sotomayor — have been quite candid about the challenges they encountered there.

The rarefied environment of a place like Princeton can undermine first-generation and low-income students’ sense that they belong there. And research shows that that sense of belonging really matters, influencing students’ academic as well as social experience of college. So elite colleges must make a real effort to help students from less-advantaged backgrounds feel at home.

At Princeton, two relatively new administrators are spearheading that effort: Christina Gonzalez, associate dean of the college and director of programs for access and inclusion, and Nimisha Barton, associate director of the Freshman Scholars Institute and programs for access and inclusion.

Their goal is twofold: Empower first-generation students to make Princeton work for them, and make the university more welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds. To do that, the two administrators are drawing on their own experiences, their scholarship in liberal-arts disciplines, and feedback from the summer program’s alumni.

“We’re up against a lot in terms of history,” Ms. Barton said. And universities don’t change overnight.

### ‘PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTAND’

Doug Ashley found that his small Montana high school “had not prepared me very well” for the academic work at Princeton. It did not offer calculus, for one thing, so Mr. Ashley, a first-generation student who graduated this spring with a degree in computer science, took it online.

Mr. Ashley noticed that some classmates in his introductory physics classes had already taken the Advanced Placement version of the course and were expecting an easy A. That left him working hard to learn what some of them already knew. “The hard part,” he said, “was mainly there wasn’t

a level playing field.”

That was true socially, too. Mr. Ashley planned to join one of the university’s 11 eating clubs, but it didn’t work out because of an administrative mix-up. Meals provide a key time for busy students to catch up with friends, Mr. Ashley said, and the expense of an eating club, plus the groups’ reputation as oriented toward wealthy students, causes separation, as low-income students are more likely to eat in the dining halls or cook for themselves.

Mr. Ashley and other students like him said that there was no stigma around being first-generation at Princeton. But they said other students at the university were sometimes oblivious to what life looked like for their peers from less-advantaged backgrounds.

“Mainly it comes down to minor things where people don’t understand,” he said, like watching classmates take fancy vacations during breaks while being unable to afford to even travel home.

Ms. Gonzalez, 34, knows what it is like to feel out of place in the Ivy League. She was the first in her family to attend an elite institution — both of her parents had earned associate degrees when she enrolled at Dartmouth College, though her mother went on for more education around the time she was there. She recalls showing up to go on a pre-college hiking trip dressed up in her heels and confronting a sea of students in Patagonia — she hadn’t realized that everyone would arrive in their hiking gear.

Ms. Gonzalez, who earned a Ph.D. in English from Brown University in 2012, also sees connections between her scholarship and her administrative work. She examines the relationship between the Victorian novel, English assimilative social-reform movements, and the backlash to those movements. Studying what happened when social institutions were becoming less exclusive in 19th-century England informs how she thinks about Princeton’s efforts to do the same today.

Ms. Barton, 31, also brings both personal and scholarly experience to her role. The daughter of an American father and a mother who immigrated from India, she spent her undergraduate years at the University of California at Berkeley, a diverse campus where all of her closest friends had immigrant experiences of their own. After college, as her friends started their jobs, Ms. Barton went to Princeton for graduate school and was “just lost.”

Only when she got involved in the Freshman Scholars Institute, first as a resident graduate student, did she find a vocabulary to explain her own experience as a first-generation student. She stayed involved with the program, spending one summer as a writing-center fellow and then teaching the program’s humanities course the summer after defending her dissertation. She began her current position just over a year ago.

Ms. Barton, who earned a Ph.D. in history in

2014, has given some thought to what sorts of students Berkeley and Princeton were originally built to educate, and how that can shape the student experience at each, even today.

Her scholarly interest is immigration, with a focus on the norms set by states and societies that make some people insiders and others outsiders. These days, cultivating a sense of belonging among students who may feel like outsiders is a big part of her job.

It's an important one, too. "When students don't have a sense of fit or belonging, that affects their level of engagement with the college environment," said Nicole Stephens, an associate professor of management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. If they feel disconnected from the campus, Ms. Stephens said, students may be less likely to reach out to a professor when they need help or to make new friends. That, she said, can create a negative, self-reinforcing cycle.

Before beginning her graduate program at Princeton, Ms. Barton had decided to become a professor. But she hadn't understood that getting a Ph.D. was about research, not learning how to be a teacher. Graduate school was disorienting. "I didn't know what was wrong with me," she said. These days, when she hears students say, "I was smart before I came to Princeton. What happened?," she wants them to know that the problem is not them; it's Princeton. Ms. Barton learned that only in her late 20s, she said, and hopes her students don't have to wait as long.

### **A SENSE OF BELONGING**

Princeton has been working to recruit less-advantaged students for some time. The university eliminated loans from the financial-aid packages of low-income students back in 1998 (it expanded the policy to cover all students in 2001). Like its peers, Princeton has a number of programs meant to increase socioeconomic diversity on its campus.

But bringing students to the campus and supporting them after they arrive are two different things. That's where programs like the Freshman Scholars Institute come in.

Princeton has been running some form of summer bridge program for so long that the administrators in charge of it now aren't quite sure when or why it began. From what Ms. Barton has pieced together, it seems to have its origins in programming for athletes and minority students. Even five years ago, she said, "the mission was very unclear."

Ms. Barton and Ms. Gonzalez are working to focus and achieve that mission, both by fine-tuning the institute and by expanding on its work.

Students are invited to the institute based on a holistic evaluation meant to uncover which incoming freshmen have had the least exposure to an en-

vironment like Princeton's. Selected students are a subset of the university's incoming first-generation and low-income freshmen — distinct but overlapping groups. Those who accept the invitation take two credit-bearing classes and are introduced to many of the university's support resources and extracurricular opportunities.

One way that colleges can help students feel the

**“The hard part was mainly there wasn't a level playing field.”**

all-important sense of belonging, said Ms. Stephens, the Northwestern professor, is to make sure they know that “being a good student does not mean being independent.” Successful students at elite colleges seek help when they need it.

That's part of what the two administrators want to emphasize to first-generation students. All students need help navigating the bureaucracy and customs of a place like Princeton; it's just that some walk in the door with a support system poised to guide them through it, and others do not. By building such a system for first-generation and low-income students, “we're rendering visible to everyone what your average student needs,” Ms. Barton said.

High-school students absorb knowledge, while college students are supposed to create it. That shift can be tricky for anyone, but less-advantaged students may not believe that they have the right to make their scholarly mark — the very thing college will ask them to do, Ms. Gonzalez said. Part of what the Freshman Scholars Institute strives to teach the students, she said, is “how to have your voice heard as a scholar.” The idea is not to assimilate first-generation students or turn them into “some kind of mythic Princeton student,” she said, but to help them unleash the unique contributions they can make to the university.

After all, one major reason colleges seek a diverse student body is so that all students benefit from hearing from a wide range of experiences and views.

### **SHARING KNOWLEDGE**

The transition into college is widely seen as a pivotal moment for students — there's a reason

every message administrators want to convey to them is crammed into orientation. But when Ms. Barton and Ms. Gonzalez met with alumni of the Freshman Scholars Institute as part of their effort to improve it, one of the most consistent messages they heard was that the summer program wasn't enough. It didn't reach all the students who might benefit, and even those who attended wanted support during college, not just on their way in the door.

Based on that feedback, the two administrators developed the new Scholars Institute Fellows Program, which covers all four years at Princeton. It's available to students who completed the Freshman Scholars Institute, those who were invited but couldn't go, those who were considered but not invited, and anyone who self-identifies as first-generation or low-income. One hundred students participated last fall, and the number rose to 155 last spring.

SIFP, as it is known, is based in peer mentorship. Upperclassmen serve as "head fellows," who mentor 10 or so underclassmen with the help of a faculty member.

The program is voluntary, but students who participate are expected to go to events put on by SIFP, like sessions on networking or résumés, or cross-listed events held by the career center or writing center. Students are also expected to at-

tend monthly meetings with their mentorship groups and do a summer enrichment experience, like an internship or study abroad.

Nora Niazian participated in the Freshman Scholars Institute, but even so, she said, "there were a lot of things about transitioning to Princeton that were difficult for me."

This past year, Ms. Niazian served as a head fellow in the Scholars Institute Fellows Program, and she plans to do so again next year as a senior. "If I can make it easier for anyone else, that would be a great thing to do," she said.

As a head fellow, Ms. Niazian brings her hard-won knowledge of how Princeton works to younger students who may not be able to get the answers they need from parents or others in their communities back home. For instance, Ms. Niazian said, it took her two years to understand how the financial-aid office's "summer savings expectation" works, but now she can explain it as well as anyone can. "I've had to navigate a lot of these things already," she said.

The program has also become a big part of Ms. Niazian's social life at Princeton. She didn't join an eating club for financial reasons, and SIFP "helps to kind of fill that void," she said. "A lot of what is happening at Princeton now," she said, "is we're starting to establish a low-income, first-generation community."

*Originally published on July 7, 2016*



# 'I Fit in Neither Place'

By FERNANDA ZAMUDIO-SUAREZ



CHARLIE MAHONEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

**A**S STUDENTS who are the first in their families to go to college have gained attention in higher education, many colleges are trying to support them with programs and resources. Still, divisions between first-generation students and their peers prevail — and even for those who become faculty members, cultural challenges remain.

M. Sonja Ardoin, through her research and her work, is tackling the issues that first-generation students face. As program director for higher-education administration and a clinical assistant professor at Boston University, Ms. Ardoin, who was a first-generation student from rural southern Louisiana, still notices the higher-ed jargon that can trip students up.

Terms as familiar on campus as “major,” “minor,” “office hours,” and “study abroad” can cause confusion and be isolating for first-generation students, she says. Simple changes, like explaining what those words mean or using more-universal language, can help. So can introducing students to classmates, as well as faculty and staff members, who can identify with their varied experiences.

Ms. Ardoin spoke with *The Chronicle* about still trying to fit into academe, and about what campuses should keep in mind to support and not stigmatize first-generation students and faculty members.

**Q. As a first-gen student, how did you decide to go to college?**

**A.** There was a lot of messaging from my family, even though nobody had been to college, that I needed to go to college to get a better life. They never exactly told me what “better” meant. I just figured it meant different than what we had in my hometown, in my family. There was a push to have good grades, because the only way I was going to go to college was if I got scholarships. There wasn’t a capacity in my family to pay for college.

I applied to three schools — back then it was all paper — and I waited. I remember one day I picked up the mail on my way home from school. There was this letter from LSU, and I remember sitting in my pretty crappy vehicle thinking, I’m going to open this, and it’s going to determine the rest of my life.

**Q. How did you end up pursuing a career in higher education?**

**A.** As an undergraduate at LSU, I applied to be an orientation leader, did student government, and through that I met some administrators, particularly a woman named K.C. White, who is now vice president for student affairs at Kennesaw State, in Georgia. She said to me, “You’re very involved on campus. What are you interested in?” I was already an education major. I already thought education was my career path. She let me know that I could work at a university for the rest of my life. I

had never considered that. I guess I never understood who helped make universities operate.

**Q. How has your experience as a first-generation student influenced your higher-ed career?**

**A.** I think I’ll always feel like a first-generation student, even though I’ve now been part of academia for over a decade. There are still components that seem very new to me or that I don’t understand. I don’t know if it ever leaves you, the feeling that the system wasn’t necessarily set up for you. Historically, higher education was for white, male, Christian, affluent folks.

When I got to my Ph.D., I knew I wanted to study first-gen students. While they are getting more attention now, in literature and the press, that wasn’t the case when I started college, in 2000. And still a lot of the time we use “first gen” as an umbrella term, when really it’s not. Some students face racial issues or class issues. But not all first-gen students have class issues. I’m trying to, in my research and in my work, figure out how do we tell the stories, the nuances of first-gen students in a way that shows their intersectionality. What does it mean to be a first-gen student for different populations?

**Q. What do institutions often miss?**

**A.** They make a lot of assumptions that first gen is also working class or poor, which is not necessarily the case. There are folks, for example in my hometown, who when oil was big did well. There is more to social-class identity or first-gen identity than just whether or not you have money.

My dissertation research is on academic jargon and how we have a specific language at the university that creates in-groups and out-groups. Folks who have experience in higher education maybe understand what a major is, they understand what a minor is, they understand what the Fafsa is. For a student who is first generation, typically there’s a bigger learning curve, because these are not typical words that are used in their household or in their community. When we use that jargon in our admissions material or on our websites, it sends an unintended message to a lot of first-generation students: that you aren’t welcome here, because you don’t understand the language we’re using to promote our institution.

**Q. What can be done?**

**A.** From a recruiting standpoint, we can look at doing county- or parish-based high-school fairs, with options in the state or neighboring states. I never thought about applying to schools out of state, even though my academic credentials would have qualified me to do that. The concept of undermatching we see a lot with first-gen students, because we aren’t recruiting where they are, or their high schools don’t have the resources to spend on college counseling.

Recruitment should come in multiple forms — not just online, but hard copies in case people don't have access to technology. And we should look at recruitment materials and ask, Are we using jargon? If we are, can we explain it, or can we just extract it and use words that are more universal?

**Q. When a first-gen student gets to a four-year institution, what are some of the cultural divides?**

**A.** There's still a jargon issue. There could be a financial issue. There's not being able to fully engage because you don't understand the system. You may not really know what office hours are. Or it might be like, "You can apply for study-abroad scholarships," but you don't know where the scholarship office is, or you don't know what study abroad is.

These things seem natural to students whose parents or family members went to college, but first-gen students are kind of playing catch-up to feel fully like college students.

**Q. What about when they go home?**

**A.** That can create some tension. They may be learning a new language, new belief systems, new perspectives that differ from the way of life or the way of thinking that they came from. There's a lot of literature around how students feel. I can speak for myself that I fit in neither place. People at home think I'm "too good" now in some capacities, and in academia I will always feel like I don't quite fit, either.

**Q. How can colleges support first-generation students without stigmatizing them?**

**A.** That is a very challenging line to draw. In some ways, offering particular resources can label students. I think it's a matter of offering opportunities that students can self-select into. For example, Brown University just opened the first center for first-gen and low-income students, and it's creating a physical space for those students on the campus. There was recently a conference for first-gen students at Ivy League institutions. The University of Wisconsin at Madison has a first-gen-student association. The University of Kentucky and others are doing first-gen living/learning communities. Some institutions offer their students the chance to come early, in the summer, to help with that acclimation and socialization process, to help them prepare for their first semester.

Meeting other first-gen students, so they don't feel like they're the only one, can be very helpful. What they do at Boston University is connect first-gen students to other first-gen students, administrators, and faculty who have had this experience,

too. People at all levels of the institution can potentially identify with their situation.

**Q. What issues come up for first-generation faculty?**

**A.** Part of it is that the system is always going to feel different and new, like we're still learning it. The whole process of reappointment and tenure and publication is still new for me. Learning how all that works can be a challenge.

From the social-class angle, Alfred Lubrano has a book called *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams* (Wiley, 2005) that talks about the concept of class straddling. Even though now my income may say that I am middle or upper-middle class, I don't always operate and feel that way. A lot of people focus on the financial capital, when really it's cultural capital, social capital, linguistic capital, and navigational capital, which is out of Tara Yosso's work on community cultural wealth. There are still some things from my working-class background that don't always align with academia's middle-class expectations.

**Q. Like what?**

**A.** Types of language — accents still have a stigma. Particularly a Southern accent has some connotations. A colleague and I always talk about being at a fancy events where you have to use specific silverware. I hate to going to white-tablecloth restaurants. They make me very uncomfortable. Certain types of food you're expected to eat. I would much rather have a beer in a koozie, but an academic event is more based on, What kind of wine are you drinking? That's not at all what I grew up with or what I enjoy.

**Q. You've started a group for first-generation faculty.**

**A.** It's out of the Naspa organization, for student-affairs administrators. My colleagues Becky Martinez, Tori Svoboda, and I did a session at a national conference around the concept of class straddling, and there was a response that we want to involve more people. We approached the national organization and said, Hey, what if we did a group that focused specifically on folks who now work in academia? Some of those people identify as first gen, but the common link is having a poor or working-class background. We're still in the growing stages, but we've had quite a bit of interest from folks who want to explore what it means for our hiring practices, for our definitions of professionalism, and just in general for the experience.

*This interview has been edited for length and clarity.*

*Originally published on December 11, 2016*





ADOLFO VALLE FOR THE CHRONICLE

# *Micro-Barriers Loom Large for First-Generation Students*

By ERIC JOHNSON

**B**Y THE TIME J.D. Vance got ready to apply for law school, he'd already survived an abusive and chaotic childhood, made it through Marine Corps boot camp and a deployment to Iraq, and galloped through a bachelor's degree at Ohio State in less than two years. But as he looked over the application for Stanford law, he found himself stymied by a simple requirement — a signature from his dean. “I didn’t know the dean of my college at Ohio State,” Vance writes in his best-selling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*. “I’m sure she is a lovely person, and the form was clearly little more than a formality. But I just couldn’t ask.”

He crumpled the form and finished his other applications, the ones that didn’t require help from a total stranger. And that’s why one of the most talked-about books of the year is written by a Yale law graduate instead of a Stanford alum.

In this agitated election year, *Hillbilly Elegy* has been closely mined for insights about working-class America and the sense of alienation that has roiled

our politics and inflamed our public debate. With his Appalachian roots and searing personal story, Vance has become an eager translator across the cultural chasm, unpacking Hillary Clinton’s “basket of deplorables” in a *New York Times* op-ed and talking religion with Terry Gross. Vance’s lessons on college access have gone largely unnoticed, but *Hillbilly Elegy* has plenty to say about the intangible barriers that make it so tough for an impoverished, first-generation kid to make the leap to higher education.

That simple form for Stanford law is a perfect example of where a relatively tiny difference in culture can make a huge difference in access. Vance didn’t lack knowledge of the form — he wasn’t suffering an information breakdown, as we so often assume of first-generation students. He simply wasn’t willing to ask what felt like a favor of someone he didn’t know. Self-reliance is a cardinal virtue in Vance’s world, where bonds of kinship and trust take years to develop. “The professors I selected to write my letters [of recommendation]

had gained my trust,” he writes. “I listened to them nearly every day, took their tests, and wrote papers for them.” They could be asked for a favor. The dean, both a stranger and a bigwig, could not.

It’s easy to view that as a silly distinction for a student to make, especially for something as important as a law-school application. But from a student’s perspective, requiring the pro forma signature of a random college official probably seems pretty silly, too. Higher education is choked with micro-barriers like that.

Reading *Hillbilly Elegy*, I thought about how much time we spend imploring students to seek guidance for obstacles of our own devising. We produce bureaucratic hurdles, then ask students to assume good faith and a willingness to help on the part of professors and administrators who don’t always exhibit such openness. Wealthier, parentally enabled students feel perfect freedom to ask for accommodations in exchange for their tuition dollars. But Vance highlights the awkwardness of telling low-income students to be grateful for their scholarships and also empowered to make demands.

He’s especially sharp in describing the opaque corners of the collegiate world, where decisions are made about who gets job opportunities, who makes it into the right student groups, and who gets connected to the most helpful alumni. These are the areas where no amount of diligent rule-following will do the trick, because the rules are intentionally unwritten. “The entire process was a black box, and no one I knew had the key,” Vance writes of his experience trying to join *The Yale Law Journal*. “I had no idea what was going on.”

A similarly hazy authority holds sway when it comes to summer internships, which matter hugely for a student’s career prospects. Not only is there no manual to guide the uninitiated; there’s also a taboo against direct questions. “There’s no database that spits out this information, no central source,” Vance writes. “In fact, it’s considered almost unseemly to ask.”

That’s because we’re all a little squeamish about the mechanics of networking, and our discomfort comes to the fore when we have to explain the dark arts to a newcomer. I felt the weight of Vance’s incredulity when he describes his first internship search at Yale law. “That week of interviews showed me that successful people are playing an entirely different game,” he writes. “They don’t flood the job market with résumés, hoping that some employer will grace them with an interview. They network.”

Vance was lucky enough to have mentors who offered honest guidance, primers on the unwritten rules of an unseen game, but too few students get that kind of break. The Gallup-Purdue Index puts enormous stock in the value of mentor relationships, correlating them to higher personal well-

being and job satisfaction among graduates. But the inaugural survey in 2014 found that barely one in five students had a mentor as part of their undergraduate experience. Outside of niche scholarship and retention programs, we’re not doing nearly enough to help students navigate the unmapped terrain of academic and professional life.

In one particularly vivid example, Vance recounts a recruiting dinner at a white-tablecloth restaurant in downtown New Haven. Faced with more cutlery than any sane person needs, he retreated to the bathroom for a phone-a-friend lifeline on fork selection. Reading the details of his nerve-wracking meal — “That’s when I realized ‘sparkling’ water meant ‘carbonated’ water” — I felt proud that my university offers voluntary etiquette dinners for students. It’s easy to criticize that kind of course as outmoded or patronizing, until you read Vance’s very real mortification as he tries to bluff his way through a formal evening. If the world is going to judge you on something, we ought to be willing to teach it.

The biggest lesson of *Hillbilly Elegy* is just how much there is to teach. As the divides in our culture and our economy have deepened, bridging the distance between Vance’s world and the college environment has become a bigger lift. Our well-mannered discretion about this gap is born of best intentions, but it leaves working-class kids like Vance at a real disadvantage. He makes a persuasive case for more blunt acknowledgment, ending one chapter with a “non-exhaustive list of things I didn’t know when I got to Yale Law School.” It includes gems like, “that your shoes and belt should match,” and my personal favorite, “that finance was an industry people worked in.”

Vance’s story is not universal. He’s white, which affords no small amount of privilege. He benefited from a network of extended family that supported and cared for him, however imperfectly. And he attended a decent public school. None of those things are taken for granted. That Vance still felt such a vast gulf between his world and academe is a measure of our challenge. And it suggests there’s still a great deal our institutions can do to feel less foreign to our own students.

That means not just sharing information and simplifying processes, but also telling stories like Vance’s. It means avoiding the coded politesse that plays down the class divide and benefits of those on the winning side of it. Candor is not a cure-all, but Vance’s memoir makes a powerful case for a more honest accounting of what separates us.

*Eric Johnson is assistant director for policy analysis and communications in the Office of Scholarships & Student Aid at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This essay reflects his personal views.*

*Originally published on October 30, 2016*

# Here's Smarty-Pants, Home for the Holidays

By STACEY PATTON

**W**HEN MELISSA BOONE visits her family for the holidays, she is enveloped by the clatter of pots and pans and the smell of collard greens, ham drizzled with maple syrup, and pumpkin cheesecake. For the first few hours, she revels in what she describes as the “comfortable chaos” of her relatives’ townhouse, in Sewell, N.J.

Everyone talks at the same time, kids run and play, and football is on the television. Inside the small kitchen, the women stir, bake, gossip, and laugh.

But in many ways Ms. Boone feels like a stranger in her own black, working-class family. Not only was she the first one to attend college, but she is now a fifth-year Ph.D. student in sociomedical sciences at Columbia University.

“I don’t know where to find my place,” she says.

Sometimes she’s allowed to mix batter, cut vegetables, or wash dishes. But her aunts and cousins often tell her to stay out of the way, saying that despite her years of higher education, she doesn’t have “common sense.” She says she feels pressure to “dumb down” to fit in. With family, her mannerisms aren’t polished, and she uses nonstandard English. If asked about her research, which is about the role of social cognition in people’s sexual behavior, she says she gives “the most basic” answers.

Her younger sister, Caitlin, calls her “big brain.” Others call her weird and a geek. Caitlin considers her a role model. But her mother, who has a nursing diploma from a community college, doesn’t understand her academic goals, and her father, who finished high school, doesn’t understand why she’s still in school. When she came home for Christmas last year, Ms. Boone

says, he suggested that she leave her Ph.D. program and get a “real job.”

“Even though I’m part of the family, I have one foot out,” she says. “Their comments are not malicious, but it feels like they’re saying to me, ‘You’re different from us.’”

The disconnect with family that Ms. Boone experiences is not uncommon among graduate students home for the holidays or any other occasion, especially when they are first-generation graduate students or from a working-class background.

Tensions, misunderstandings, and awkwardness can leave them torn between cultures and identities,

amid family members who are envious or angry that their loved one has gone off and come back changed.

In *The Chronicle’s* online forums, doctoral students have written about how they must put up with family jokes—one Ph.D. cited something along the lines of, “Hey, I hear you are a doctor now! Hey, doctor, I got this pimple on my butt, would you look at it for me?”—and how they have just stopped talking with relatives after being accused of lecturing or “talking down” to them.

“My family was proud of my education when I went to the community college,” one person wrote. “When I was accepted as a transfer to a prestigious four-year university, they thought I was putting on airs. When I went on for an M.A., they figured I was too lazy to work. The Ph.D. was just a bafflement.”

Many graduate students coping with those kinds of family dynamics are frustrated because they feel devalued and disrespected, says Mary Ann Covey, a psychologist who is associate director of student-counseling services at Texas A&M University at College Station.

“Graduate students are in an environment



MATT ROTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

**Melissa Boone, a doctoral student at Columbia U., at Thanksgiving: “Even though I’m part of the family,” she says, “I have one foot out.”**



where they are respected, encouraged, and fighting hard to gain that respect from their faculty and colleagues,” she says. “Then they go home and are back in the role of being treated like a little girl or boy. It happens to undergrads, too, but for first-generation graduate students it’s especially confusing, because they are looking for that acknowledgment of what they’re doing, and they’re not getting it.”

### ‘WHY DO IT?’

Ms. Boone grew up in New Windsor, N.Y., and suburban Atlanta. Her father works for the Atlanta transit system, and her mother occasionally worked at Walmart and McDonald’s before becoming a nurse. Ms. Boone’s research, involving the risk among gay men of contracting HIV, creates a further divide with her parents, who are Jehovah’s Witnesses and hold conservative beliefs.

“People from working-class backgrounds understand going to work,” Ms. Boone says. “They understand salaries. They don’t understand the nature of graduate-school life: researching, writing papers. When you’re face to face, there’s a disconnect between them and you.”

Nick Repak, founder of Grad Resources, a non-profit group that serves “the practical and emotional needs of graduate students,” and the 24-hour National Grad Crisis-Line, often hears from graduate students who feel alienated from their families.

“The home folks are not going to understand what it’s like being in grad school,” he says. “They have no idea why it’s necessary to put in a five- or six-year investment into a program.”

Graduate students often love the thrill of their work, of research and discovery, but parents are often more focused on what’s next, he says. “Their parents know there’s a good possibility they might get out of school with a Ph.D. and not have a clear opportunity to teach and do research. So they ask, ‘Why do it?’”

Pablo José López Oro, a first-year doctoral student in the African-American-studies program at Northwestern University, says he feels a “major disconnect” with family and friends at home. The youngest of three in his family, he grew up in a housing project in Brooklyn, N.Y. He was the first in his family, and the only man on his block, to go to college.

When he’s back home, he hears all kinds of things: “You went off to college and forgot about us. You’re not here for us,” he says his siblings tell him. His friends call him “college boy” and “white boy” and accuse him of selling out. Sometimes, though, they also express pride.

His parents, who are from Honduras, became U.S. citizens in 2010 after spending many years as undocumented workers. Mr. López Oro believes

he is fulfilling their dream of success by pursuing a higher education. But they are more focused, he says, on day-to-day finances.

“So many bills are piling up,” he says. “Here I am pursuing a Ph.D. and trying to convince them that this is going to pay off. Their idea of a successful degree is a lawyer or doctor who is going to make a certain amount of money to get us out of the projects.”

Thanksgiving is a festive time in his family’s cramped apartment. Relatives crowd together to enjoy turkey and pork, macaroni and cheese, potato salad, rice and beans, yucca and *pastelillos*.

The talk about his studies is always short. “They ask, ‘How are classes going?’ It’s a two-minute conversation,” he says.

There’s typically a much longer conversation, Mr. López Oro says, about his older brother’s construction work and his trips to jail, or about his sister’s marriage and five children.

He wants to talk about the rigors of graduate-school life, about the many hours of reading and writing. He wants to explain his research on the socialization of young immigrants from Honduras, on how the girls are taught to retain traditional cultural values while the boys are encouraged to become Americanized.

“I want to share this with them,” Mr. López Oro says, “but my family doesn’t value intellectual labor. They value physical labor.”

His sense of disconnect is heightened by the fact that his culture places a high value on parenthood, he says. “They see me as a school addict. It’s difficult being the only one in your family doing what you’re doing and having to go back into that space where everyone else’s lives stop in terms of ambition and desire.”

### ‘A REAL FEAR’

Weston Welge, a doctoral student in optical science at the University of Arizona, pursued his education to separate himself from his family.

“I knew I didn’t want to follow in my parents’ footsteps,” he says.

His parents, white and working class, are divorced. Both of them seem proud of him, he says, but send mixed messages. Mr. Welge’s mother, who worked as a bartender and is now unemployed, pushed him to go to college so that one day he could make a lot of money. She bragged about him to others, but she also put him down, he says. “You’re just book-smart and I’m street-smart,” he says she told him. “Street smarts are what really matter.”

Mr. Welge’s father, who works at a Coors brewery, often complains that his bosses, who are recent college graduates, just sit in offices and drink coffee, while he does three times as much work as they do. “My dad doesn’t think that a recent grad-



MATT ROTH FOR THE CHRONICLE

The academic couple, Ron Brown (standing) and Melissa Boone (to his right), join in a word game. “Graduate students are ... fighting hard to gain that respect from their faculty and colleagues,” she says. “Then they go home and are back in the role of being treated like a little girl or boy.”

uate should start at a higher salary than him after working for 25 years,” Mr. Welge says.

When he decided to pursue a Ph.D., his mother told him he was avoiding “the real world” and his father worried about what the payoff would be. Recently, Mr. Welge says, his father has started to ask thoughtful questions about what he’s doing in graduate school. “He asks how my research on cancer imaging can be applied to society. Sometimes he’ll ask me to explain my research technique.”

Mr. Welge thinks his father regrets not having gone to college. “I wonder,” Mr. Welge says, “if now he gets to experience what college would have been like through me.”

To bridge the gaps created by educational disparities within a family, graduate students should try to be more empathetic, say Ms. Covey, at Texas A&M, and Mr. Repak, of Grad Resources.

Underneath the homecoming gibes are fear, insecurity, and a lack of understanding that graduate students should recognize as reflecting on their family members, not themselves, Ms. Covey says.

“When you are more educated than your parents, there’s going to be an element of insecurity that gets played out at family gatherings,” she says.

*Originally published on December 3, 2012*

“There’s a real fear that you’re smarter, going to be more successful, leave them behind, stop visiting them, or you’re going to cut them out of their lives. To them you are becoming a person they can’t connect to intellectually or financially.”

Those dynamics, she says, are not unique to first-generation graduate students or those from working-class or minority backgrounds. Even if a student’s parents are professionals, with bachelor’s or even graduate degrees, sometimes there’s still a disconnect.

“I see the same dynamics play out with students who have parents that went to college and under-achieved,” Ms. Covey says. “If a student’s performance is off the scale, then sometimes their parents’ own self-worth is challenged. Parents who are comfortable in their own skin aren’t threatened by their child’s achievements.”

Mr. Repak advises students to do a better job of acquainting their relatives with the world of graduate school. “Share the passion of what it’s like to work with brilliant collegial folks,” he says. “Talk about your opportunities to teach. You have to help your family care about what you do, because they won’t get it unless you help bring them along.”

# 10 'Best Practices' for Serving First-Generation Students

By JUSTIN DOUBLEDAY

**A** REPORT released by the Council of Independent Colleges gives guidance to institutions that want to improve resources for students who are the first in their families to attend college. Based on the experiences of 50 colleges that received grants from the group and the Walmart Foundation to enhance such programs, the report lists 10 "best practices" to promote first-generation students' academic success. Those suggestions are as follows:

**1. Identify, actively recruit, and continually track first-generation students.**

Aid eligibility is one indicator institutions can use to help identify first-generation students.

**2. Bring them to the campus early.**

Summer bridge programs let colleges better prepare first-generation students for the rigors of higher education. The programs also give students a chance to bond with classmates, meet faculty and staff members, and become familiar with the campus.

**3. Focus on the distinctive features of first-generation students.**

First-generation students on any given campus will often share one or more characteristics. Building support systems around those similarities can help colleges better meet students' needs.

**4. Develop a variety of programs that meet students' continuing needs.**

Colleges should develop programs that prepare first-generation students for academic success during college and for careers after graduation.

**5. Use mentors.**

Mentors, whether they are fellow students, staff or faculty members, alumni, or people in

the community, can provide valuable guidance to first-generation students. Some of the best mentors are those who were also the first in their families to attend college.

**6. Institutionalize a commitment to first-generation students.**

Colleges should involve the entire campus community in promoting the success of first-generation students. That approach creates a supporting and welcoming environment.

**7. Build community, promote engagement, and make it fun.**

Colleges need to focus on more than academic performance to improve retention. Through nonacademic activities, students can build meaningful relationships.

**8. Involve families (but keep expectations realistic).**

First-generation students often struggle more than their peers with moving away from home. Communicating with families can help keep them connected to their student while he or she is away.

**9. Acknowledge, and ease when possible, financial pressures.**

With many coming from low-income families, first-generation students often struggle with finances. Colleges should provide financial-aid information to students and parents whenever possible. Creating scholarships specifically for first-generation students can help as well.

**10. Keep track of your successes and failures: What works and what doesn't?**

Colleges should look beyond grade-point averages and retention rates to assess its first-generation programs. Other methods for measuring success include: college records, surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus groups.

*Originally published on October 24, 2013*

# Campus Child Care, a ‘Critical Student Benefit,’ Is Disappearing

By SCOTT CARLSON

**A**S A FIRST-GENERATION, low-income college student, Ashley Abregu faces outside challenges. In this city, a destination for immigrants, where a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, there are many people like her.

But Ms. Abregu carries another big challenge, one that comes in a tiny package: Her name is Aubrie, and she is 3 years old.

Ms. Abregu, who was born in Peru and raised in the United States, is a single mother — one of

PATERSON, N.J.

about 1,800 parents who attend Passaic County Community College here. But among them, she is lucky: She and about 100 other parents got their children into an all-day child-care program run by the college, in a space adjacent to its main building. And because the program is supported by the local public schools — to give children a jumpstart before entering kindergarten — Ms. Abregu pays nearly nothing.

Without it, “I don’t think I would be able to go to college,” she says early one Wednesday morning at the child-care center, where the walls are plas-

MARK ABRAMSON FOR THE CHRONICLE

Karen Perez, executive director of the child-care center at Passaic County Community College, plays with children. The college’s president hopes to expand the program in coming years, but it’s not clear where the money would come from.





tered with 3-year-olds' renderings of shamrocks and the Cat in the Hat. If Aubrie weren't enrolled here, her mother would have to pay about \$200 a week for private day care and spend hours transporting her daughter on buses. Ms. Abregu relies on her own father for support; while she was pregnant, Aubrie's father was arrested for drug dealing and deported.

Now majoring in the humanities, with plans to work in political campaigns and health activism, Ms. Abregu hopes her daughter will emulate her. "We come here, and she says, 'Mommy, your school,'" pointing to the college, Ms. Abregu says. Since coming to the child-care center, Aubrie has been more social, more eager to learn. "Kids are going to follow whatever you do, especially at this age."

Ms. Abregu's story is one often overlooked in higher education, yet it is more common than people assume. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research, nearly five million college students — about a quarter of all undergraduates, and 30 percent of the community-college popula-

tion — are parents. About 3.4 million of those student-parents are women, and two million of them are single mothers.

For those parents, child care is "the critical student benefit," says Catherine Hill, vice president for research at the American Association of University Women.

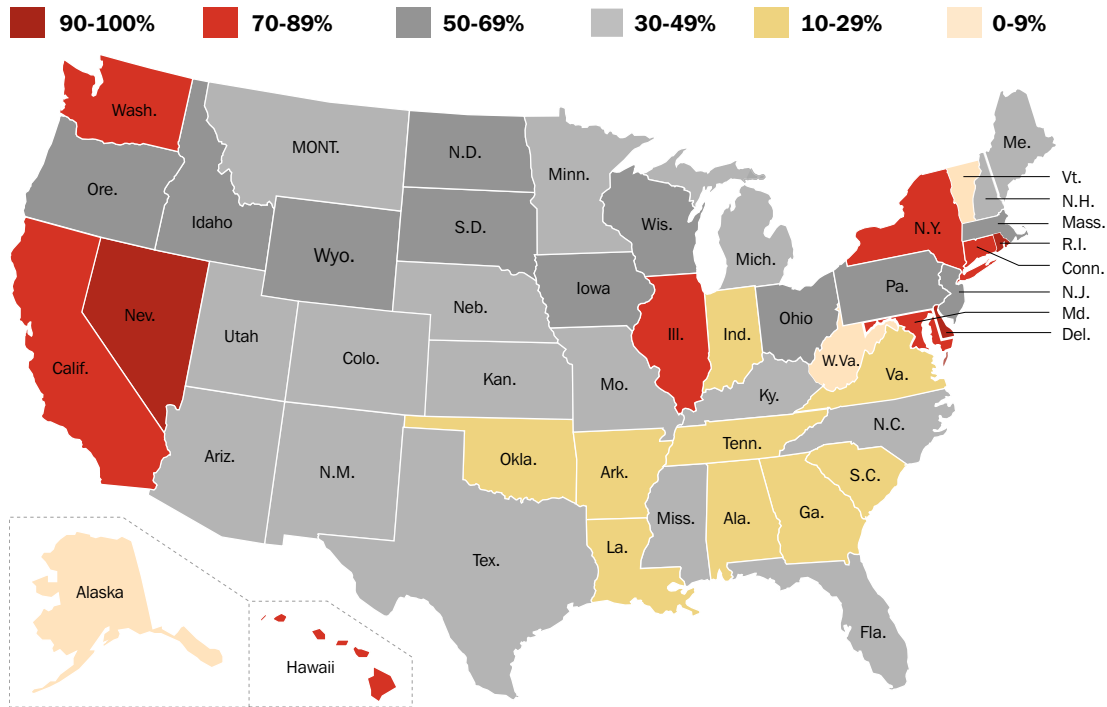
"Students say that if they don't have child care, then the other support services just don't mean that much," she says. "If you don't have child care, then you can't go to tutoring or a mentoring program or any other number of support services that schools offer."

But Ms. Hill and others who study the needs of low-income women in college have noted that many institutions, under financial pressure, are reducing, privatizing, or even eliminating their child-care programs, even as the number of low-income and first-generation students in college rises. According to the AAUW and the National Center for Education Statistics, less than half of the nation's community colleges offer on-campus child care.

## In Many States, Campus Child Care Is Hard to Find

Some 30 percent of community-college students are parents, but fewer than half of the nation's more than 1,000 community colleges offer on-campus child care.

Percentage of community colleges offering child care, by state



SOURCE: AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION DEPARTMENT DATA

“The trend we’re seeing is that it’s declining,” says Barbara Gault, executive director and vice president of the Institute for Women’s Policy Research, although she notes that hard numbers are difficult to find, as the issue is generally not studied. Her research and interactions with college administrators, however, have uncovered a pattern: College officials say child-care programs are too difficult and expensive to maintain, and, what’s more, they sometimes have a cynical view of the service and of parents in higher education. One administrator told her that his college “can’t deal with everyone’s personal problems.”

Parenthood is “viewed as the irksome baggage that poor people come with,” she says. She and Ms. Hill note that colleges spend money on other student services and facilities that benefit small portions of the student population: counseling services, athletics, science labs. Child care should be seen as another such service, they say.

Still, at a time when community colleges in particular are financially stressed, a child-care center can be a burden that some administrators see as expendable.

**I**N 2009, HIGHLINE COLLEGE, just south of Seattle, discontinued its 30-year-old child-care program when it was forced to cut \$2 million from its \$25-million operating budget. Lisa Skari, its vice president for institutional advancement, says the college had been subsidizing the program at an annual cost of about \$300,000 — paying \$5,000 of the \$8,000 cost of caring for each child there. “It was unfortunate, because in 2004 we had just opened a new child-care facility that was state of the art,” she says. Now a local nonprofit group is renting the center to offer child care, and the student government has set aside money to help subsidize the cost for some needy parents.

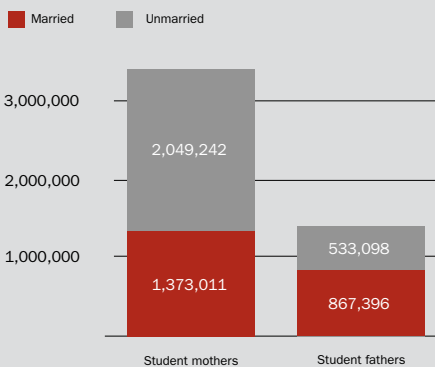
Brookdale Community College, in an affluent part of New Jersey, near the shore, has had a child-care center since 1974 that can serve up to 100 children. But it has been a financial burden, losing \$284,000 on an \$800,000 budget last year. Administrators are now discussing how to hand it over to a private operator.

Child-care professionals often criticize privatization, arguing that the profit motive can undermine teacher salaries and services. David Stout, dean of enrollment development and student affairs at Brookdale, says the college may have to continue subsidizing the child-care service to maintain quality and keep it affordable.

At a child-care center at La Guardia Community College, part of the City University of New York, children not only get healthy food, socialization, and comprehensive lessons in literacy, but they also take advantage of some of the college’s facilities — taking swimming lessons in the pool, for example. But maintaining funding for the program

## Parents on Campus

Nearly five million students in college are also parents. Most of them are women, and more than half of those women are unmarried. About 30 percent of students at community colleges are parents.



SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN'S POLICY RESEARCH ANALYSIS OF EDUCATION DEPARTMENT DATA FROM 2011-12

is always a battle. Parents in the CUNY system organize bus trips to Albany every winter to lobby state lawmakers, asking them to continue giving CUNY nearly \$3 million a year for its 18 child-care centers.

When asked about the value of the child care, the parents often deliver a remarkable message: The community college is not only helping them advance socioeconomically; it is also setting up their children for opportunities the parents never had.

Lauren Patterson, a La Guardia student, didn't learn how to read until he was 16 because he spent part of his childhood in the group-home system and bounced among various schools. His son, who is 2, has learned to recognize Spanish and English words through the child-care center. “When we go home, we don’t watch TV,” he says. “My son picks up a book.” Mr. Patterson, a veteran, wanted to go to New York University, but there were no child-care services for students there, and private child care would cost him several hundred dollars a week. Cheaper day-care services in the neighborhood plopped the kids in front of a television all day. “I am not going to forgo my son’s education so that I can get an education,” Mr. Patterson says.

**P**ASSAIC COUNTY COMMUNITY COLLEGE started its day care in 1999, after the Board of Trustees determined that affordable, high-quality child care was a pressing need among students. The child-care center also has a curricular connection: Students in the early-childhood-education program work there to get experience.

The college managed to pay for its services

through a combination of state funding and various grants. In the late 1990s, preschool was included under a previous court decision that required the state to distribute school funding more equitably. The college formed a partnership with the Paterson Public Schools to subsidize the child-care program.

Linda Carter, an assistant professor in early-childhood education and a founding manager of the day-care center, got more support from federal agencies, non-profit foundations, and the state to pay for programs in literacy and nutrition, and for evening child care.

Ms. Carter says that before the day-care center opened, student mothers would leave their kids alone in the library or bring them to class, which was disruptive. Some mothers would trade off babysitting duties in the hallways. When some single mothers turned up at college without their children, Ms. Carter wondered, Were the kids at home alone?

“It was scaring me to think what they were doing just to get to class,” she says.

Of course, many parents at Passaic County might still be in that position. The day-care center takes only 3- and 4-year-olds, and only up to about 120 kids. Steven M. Rose, the college’s president, says he hopes to expand the program in the next couple of years — but how the college would pay

for that is unclear.

The hassles of running the child-care center go beyond the expense. Mr. Rose, as the official “owner” of the center, had to get fingerprinted and reviewed by law-enforcement agencies. He is occasionally embroiled in disputes between teachers, touchy parents, and their toddlers. Some years ago, for reasons he still doesn’t understand, he had to replace the flooring in the center’s kitchen because it did not meet strict licensing standards. And closing the college in a snow-storm gets more complicated when kids need to connect with their parents.

Other challenges are more serious: If a child turns up at school with bruises, or if a court bars a relative from seeing a child, the involvement with the police

and child-protection services that can result aren’t typically part of a college president’s job.

Given hassles like those, some of Mr. Rose’s peers at other community colleges look askance at his aspirations to expand the child-care center, he says. “They think I am crazy,” he says. “But they didn’t have our demographics.”

For students who are parents, having a kid is another barrier to graduation.

“It’s all about taking away the obstacles,” Mr. Rose says, “and which ones we can mitigate, and which ones we can’t.”

**“Students say that if they don’t have child care, then the other support services just don’t mean that much.”**

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# *Let's Help First-Generation Students Succeed*

By JOSEPH SANACORE and ANTHONY PALUMBO



JASON GREENBERG FOR THE CHRONICLE

**W**E ADVOCATE for first-generation college students because we once were first-generation college students. Our parents' academic careers ended at eighth grade. To put ourselves through college, we worked jobs requiring hard, physical labor. We take it personally when low-income students, often the first in their families to attend college, are lured with loans, then left to flounder.

Many colleges have four-year graduation rates below 30 percent, some below 10 percent. Yet most of their students have loans that must be paid, whether or not the students graduate. We advocate

that students avoid colleges with four- and six-year graduation rates significantly below their state's average. Low graduation rates suggest that administrators take students' money aware and unashamed that most of the students will not graduate and may not even complete their first year.

Those schools are a discredit to academe, undermine the aspirations of students and their hard-working parents, and financially cripple them. According to a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, student debt rose 12 percent in 2013, to \$1.08 trillion. Worse, that increase is being driven mostly by Americans with poor credit and few resources. Not only is that debt a financial



time bomb; it's also an abuse of public trust.

It doesn't have to be this way. Colleges could use tuition dollars to provide services with strong potential for increasing academic success and graduation rates. The federal government and a number of states have been changing their financial-aid formulas to include timely progress toward graduation. For example, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education approved a new aid policy that increases financial awards when students meet certain credit milestones and decreases awards to institutions when their students do not graduate in a timely manner.

As Joe Garcia, Colorado's lieutenant governor and executive director of the Colorado Department of Higher Education, put it, "We're saying, Schools, it's your responsibility to admit these students and provide services to help them get through."

First-generation students often grapple not only with self-doubt and a lack of academic advice from family members, but also with work-related responsibilities, inadequate writing skills, and other personal and intellectual challenges. Although those students' academic potential is comparable to their more-accomplished peers, that potential needs to be nurtured through a consistent and cohesive support system.

To help those students stay in school, administrators and faculty members need to work collaboratively in developing a comprehensive retention plan that is well matched with students' learning interests, strengths, and needs. While not a panacea, the following considerations can help:

- Use the backgrounds of incoming students to support their "cultural capital." Involve them in setting goals that are interesting, meaningful, and culturally relevant to them, and that translate into their personal and professional lives. Professors and advisers should encourage students to engage in cultural activities that connect them to one another and to their college. Joining clubs and attending concerts and other events can build cultural capital. Those activities also support a sense of belonging, which is vitally important for first-generation students to stay in college and graduate.

- Guide students to register for courses that reflect a balance of their abilities. For example, students with verbal weaknesses should not enroll in English, Western civilization, philosophy, and a new language all at once. Instead, their chances of success are increased when their course schedule reflects a balance of English with science, technology, art, music, or other less verbally dominant courses. Those students should also register for no more than four courses each semester and should take two courses in the summer session.

- Organize a panel of juniors and seniors from

different backgrounds to discuss how they adapted to college life, including how they pursued resources and people to help guide them in decisions.

First-generation students can join the conversation and express their specific challenges in higher education. As reported in a recent study in *Psychological Science*, such low-key intervention has the potential to increase retention rates, helping students academically, emotionally, and socially.

- Support students' writing efforts by (1) modeling the writing process for them; (2) meeting with them in small, short-term groups to share pertinent feedback; and (3) encouraging them to send email attachments of their first and second drafts, then using the comment software to provide them with constructive feedback. Such support tends to improve writing, grades, and students' academic self-esteem.

- Nurture students' well-being. In a 2014 report from Gallup, in partnership with Purdue University and the Lumina Foundation, college graduates were found to be more likely to be engaged at work if they'd had professors who fostered their excitement in learning, supported their efforts in an internship-type program, encouraged them to pursue their passions, and demonstrably cared about them.

- Require rigorous courses with clear goals that offer students readily accessible and adequate support.

- Emphasize to students how crucial it is to attend class. In "The Empty Desk: Caring Strategies to Talk to Students About Their Attendance," Rose Russo-Gleicher, a social worker and adjunct professor of human services, suggests dealing with student absences directly — speaking with students privately about their attendance problems and demonstrating empathy by listening attentively and supporting their efforts to improve.

- Carefully monitor students' engagement and progress, and intervene quickly and decisively if things aren't going well.

Male students are particularly at risk of not completing their college education. A recent report from the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics, "Projections of Education Statistics to 2014," described the growing gender gap in college enrollment and completion.

Administrators, faculty, and staff should never underestimate what a brave and intimidating leap first-generation college students are taking. Helping them succeed is a fundamental responsibility, and requires as much dedication and planning on our part as students are pledging on theirs.

*Joseph Sanacore is a professor of education at Long Island University, and Anthony Palumbo is a novelist, essayist, and educational historian. They both serve as student advocates.*

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JASON GREENBERG FOR THE CHRONICLE

OPINION

# *Singing the First-Generation Blues*

By DWIGHT LANG

**A** COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, one of my students arrived during office hours with questions about the sociology course I teach each year, “The Experience of Social Class in College and the Community.” But like so many other first-generation

students I have taught, this student’s most pressing questions were really about her struggle to fit in at a university where most students, as well as staff and faculty members, could not relate to her experience.

She was upset after hearing a professor in an-

other course criticize the work of those who cleaned campus classrooms, offices, and restrooms. And the workers who cleaned the grounds weren't much better, he complained. No one challenged him as he pondered the inferior work ethic of those who did menial labor. Would students' reactions have been different, I wondered, had the professor grumbled about the workers' race or sex?

The student left class feeling invisible and powerless. If she defended "those people" and disclosed that her family members did such work, would she put herself at risk? Would testing the professor's authority hurt her grade? Would she be stigmatized in a classroom where most students were more affluent, "continuing-gens" whose parents had graduated from college?

I call stories like that "the first-gen blues." They remind me of the Longfellow poem "The Rainy Day," which includes this line made famous by the Ink Spots in the 1940s: "Into each life some rain must fall."

In my course on social class in college, which I teach at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, we explore how first-generation students negotiate class terrain: how they might respond to disparaging comments about "white trash"; whether class differences are relevant during discussions of race or gender inequalities; and what students might say or feel when they can't afford to attend a movie with friends. This is tricky business at Michigan because many students believe social class doesn't exist or see it as a result of poor choices.

First-generation students can find a supportive place in a group called First Generation College Students@Michigan, which I've advised since 2008. It holds special significance for me because I was the first and only member of my family to attend or graduate from college.

In an era when it's unacceptable to complain about supposed behaviors and attitudes of women and minority-group members, few sanctions exist when working- and lower-class people are belittled. "First-gen blues" circulate freely at selective colleges like ours, where in the fall of 2013 just under 11 percent of students reported themselves as first-generation, meaning neither parent had graduated from college. Those blues are shaped by three interrelated elements: finances, family and community concerns, and campus culture.

Money is a constant worry for low-income students, whose parents can't cover most college expenses. Neither can scholarships, grants, and work-study. Loans and significant debt are inevitable. As high-school seniors, future first-generation students face inordinate difficulties in completing their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Fafsa) forms. Summer vacations are spent working for wages instead of in unpaid internships that would add significantly to a student's "cultural capital."

Relationships with family members, meanwhile,

are often complicated for first-generation students. Their parents can offer little advice about college life, and frequently worry about how their children might change while attending college. A son could start thinking differently when he comes home for the summer after taking a course like "Class, Race, Gender, and Modernity" (a course I taught a few years ago). Will Mom and Dad understand the need to move far from home to pursue a career? Will their daughter think she's somehow better after graduating from Michigan's law school and marrying a medical student whose mother is a famous cardiovascular surgeon? This high-achieving daughter may be silently anxious about her own cross-class family structure and marriage: Will her working-class parents be able to comfortably communicate with grandchildren raised in an upper-middle-class home or easily converse with the parents of their son-in-law?

**U**NLIKE the continuing-gens for whom college represents part of a seamless connection between middle-class pasts and secure futures, first-gens experience four years on campus as a portal to middle- or upper-middle-class lives. They may learn new middle-class beliefs and ways, but deep inside they're never entirely middle-class. They're in-between and often uncomfortable. Many experience performance fatigue and are unable to publicly project the more-familiar, more-comfortable expressions and behaviors of their veiled selves.

Upward mobility, openly celebrated as the foundation of the American Dream, can produce emotional separation between students and their working-class families and communities. This complex sense of loss can generate insecurities, sometimes impeding academic achievements and requiring social and career adjustments during and after college.

The "blues" aren't easily discussed on campuses like Michigan. After arriving on campus, first-gens easily recognize differences. They hear fellow students tell stories over dinner about trips to Europe or Asia before high-school graduation. Sometimes another student might innocently inquire, What's Fafsa? When sympathetic continuing-gens ask what it was like to "grow up with nothing," many first-gens cringe, wondering how anyone could think that the first 18 years of their lives — years spent surrounded by a loving, supportive family — amounted to "nothing."

Campus life for first-gens might involve a work-study job like peeling onions in back rooms of dorm cafeterias. As they save every dollar for books and other expenses, many first-gens can't afford to eat out or move into costly off-campus housing because their share of rent would be too high. And how do they respond to theme-based parties (I have actually seen some in student neighborhoods) inviting



revelers to come dressed as trailer trash or ghetto inhabitants?

Some first-gens just shake their heads and walk away from offensive social settings. Others might discuss hurtful comments with academic advisers, housing directors, department chairs, or other administrators. And some write thoughtful op-eds for their campus newspapers.

Even when a college's staff members or administrators act to confront humiliating words and actions, those endless blues persist. Even in the absence of overt classism, subtle class differences linger under the radar. Class is ever present for first gens, whether in the classroom, hanging out with friends, or back at home.

**B**UT those "first-gen blues" can also be a source of strength as students take risks, persist, meet others from different social-class backgrounds, and cross boundaries to new

places where they can realize dreams and accomplishments.

Their considerable insights prepare them to live with purpose, and to become effective professionals, citizens, and parents who have firsthand experiences with class differences.

What became of my student? She graduated with honors and recently completed two Teach for America years working with preschoolers and their working-class parents in Tulsa, Okla. She's back in Michigan for graduate school, and regularly receives letters and notes of appreciation.

As that Longfellow poem tells us, "Behind the clouds is the sun still shining."

*Dwight Lang is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. His essay "Those of Us From Rio Linda" appears in Class Lives: Stories From Across Our Economic Divide (Cornell University Press, 2014).*

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# *Elite Colleges and the Language of Class*

By ELIZABETH M. LEE

**I**T WAS ORIENTATION week at a selective liberal-arts college for women that I'll call Linden College. Students from many walks of life were welcomed into the community, celebrated for the kind of people they were and the dreams this college's education would enable them to achieve. All of you, said the dean of admissions, have "résumés already bursting with high-school accomplishments," and here, too, "you will become overcommitted." The president of the college celebrated alumnae in high-status white-collar positions: elected politician, business executive, author. At a session on women and money, a professor enjoined students to start thinking about something called a budget; one example she gave of smart money management was saving for a spring-break trip to France. Warm welcomes and sage advice. But, combined with other routine remarks and practices on campus, they delivered an implicit message to low-income students: Even though "you're all Lindies now," you do not really belong.

Elite colleges are under increasing pressure to enroll low-income, first-generation students — and, with substantial resources for financial aid and student programming, those colleges may be good places for those students in many ways. Research shows that such students do better on those campuses than at less-selective colleges and universities — and stand to gain a great deal in economic stability.

On the other hand, it's easy to see how they might feel out of place at an elite college, with its manicured lawns, impeccably maintained historic buildings, and dining-hall food that may be fancier and more plentiful than what's served at home. Certainly low-income students remain a very small minority on these campuses. Recent figures show that a classroom of 30 at a college with high graduation rates will include perhaps five Pell Grant recipients. By contrast, around 22 students in that classroom will be from the highest income quartile.

In 2008, I began two years of research at Linden, where Pell Grant recipients made up roughly 20 percent of those enrolled. I wanted to understand how these students experienced college. I interviewed students, administrators, and faculty

members, and spent time on campus hanging out and going to parties, classes, breakfasts, campus orientations, workshops, and club meetings.

What I found is that although the institution explicitly welcomed low-income, first-generation students, as did individual faculty members and administrators, underlying messages about social class and belonging undercut those welcoming efforts. I call this the semiotics of class morality — simply put, the idea that our social standing is often associated with judgments about better or worse, more and less qualified, and that these connotations are communicated in a pervasive way. This semiotics shapes low-income, first-generation students' relationships with their college and their friends, and their lives in the classroom and even as alumnae.

Although my observations were developed from research at one particular campus, they are not limited to that location. In talking with students and alumnae from other campuses, I have heard many similar examples, and I see echoes of these concerns in my current research with low-income, first-generation students who are organizing clubs to address these problems at colleges across the country.

**L**IKE AMERICAN SOCIETY more broadly, elite colleges tend to present affluence as the norm. And, whether by implication, comparison, or simple omission, working-class and low-income lives as disadvantaged and culturally lacking — even unintelligent. Low-income, first-generation students get the message that they are not only less typical members of their college communities, but also less legitimate ones.

I saw this taking place in a number of ways. First, those orientation talks, and other public presentations describing typical students and alumnae, were centered on middle- and upper-income experiences and accomplishments. That message was reinforced over time. For example, a panel of alumnae spoke about the way that résumé building, multitasking, and professional work would bleed into personal time as familiar, inevitable parts of a successful life. In those ways, as one student said, students learned "what we are educated not to be." In materials given out to graduating

seniors one year, “bad” table manners were illustrated with a cartoon exchange between a woman in overalls speaking in a twang about hog farming and a man in a suit who looked uncomfortable. The relative values of the white-collar and blue-collar worlds was clear.

Second, the daily practices at the college, as at others like it, are deeply classed — not necessarily classist, but much more easily recognizable and acted upon by middle- and upper-income students. For example, students seeking advice at the career center were often asked in an expectant tone about parents or other relatives who might be able to connect them with summer internships or give insights about law school. Or they were presumed by peers to have expendable cash, like “only” \$10 for social fees or lunch off campus. Such exchanges left some students feeling both misunderstood and excluded.

Moreover, faculty members and administrators often act on the understanding that their students feel entitled to ask for help and to be strong self-advocates. This is especially important when it comes to asking for exceptions. While more-affluent students have often grown up to understand rules to be somewhat flexible and to know how to ask for an extension, a second chance, or a reconsideration, low-income, first-generation students are often reluctant to ask for help or unaware that such behavior is common practice.

In both of those ways — the presentation of “typical” students as middle- or upper-class and the interactions based on the assumption of such backgrounds — students from low-income, first-generation backgrounds are delegitimized as college community members.

That is not to say that the existence of lower-income students on campus is not acknowledged — it is even celebrated as a mark of the college’s diversity. Its website proudly indicates the percent of students receiving aid and the average grant amount, and new students are reminded of their classmates’ widely varied backgrounds. But the very calling out of that diversity communicates implicitly which students are the norm and which are the Other, the exceptions. Such statements make some students feel that they are not deserving or should do something “extra” to earn their place. As one young woman told me, “I think people think the college wants more diversity, and so that’s why I got in, not because I’m smart.”

In talking about percentages of students receiving financial aid or who are first-generation, and in framing those students as diverse, administrators also treat class as an essentially abstract concept, removed from the actual circumstances and realities of students’ lives. Beyond these abstracted formal presentations, class is rarely talked

about. Students told me that inequality is rarely discussed among peers or even close friends, except in an academic sense, as something that happens off campus to other people and is encountered, for example, through volunteer work or books. Moreover, few faculty members feel comfortable talking about class inequality among students, whether in class discussions or in advising. This creates a silence around class as a set of lived experiences and lets those college practices and messages communicate, if unintentionally, even more clearly that low-income, first-generation students are outsiders.

**E**LITE COLLEGES have high graduation rates, suggesting that the discomforts faced by low-income and first-generation students at elite colleges are not enough to derail them entirely. So what’s the big deal? First, the stress may foster mental, emotional, and even physical health problems with long-term effects. Second, students who feel less than welcome may make less use of resources, whether in college or the alumni network — losing out on exactly the advantages that these colleges are supposed to provide.

Moreover, a false understanding of their students may lead faculty members and administrators to miss the real issues and the crucial ways they can offer support. In a current interview project, I have spoken with students who are homeless when dorms are closed, hungry when they can’t make limited dining hours and can’t afford meals off campus, or struggling with trauma or other issues that result from growing up in poverty. They live in luxurious campus settings, but their families and “real lives” at home are not magically transformed by virtue of their student status. If faculty members and administrators do not perceive these issues as real problems affecting their students, they can hardly offer the practical or emotional support needed.

Low-income, first-generation students are already wrestling with questions about how their past, present, and future align — asking themselves who they are in their families, home communities, and college campuses. College administrators and faculty members should be having similar conversations with an eye toward how they can help students manage these transitions. Until the contradiction between welcoming and delegitimizing those students is removed, colleges will not be truly inclusive.

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