

**ON THE
BORDERS
OF THE
ACADEMY**

**Challenges and Strategies for
First-Generation Graduate Students
and Faculty**

Edited by
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Vincent Serravallo is a first-generation college graduate and academic from working-class origins. His parents and their parents, none of whom went beyond grade school, were brickyard workers, garment workers, and construction laborers in New York’s Hudson Valley dating back to the early 1900s. Brought up with a high regard for education, he received his bachelor’s degree in sociology from the State University of New York at Oswego. After graduating, he worked at a large insurance company to earn money for graduate school. Based on the union campaign he experienced at that job, he wrote a master’s thesis at the University of Kansas that analyzed employers’ aggressive anti-union campaigns. In a later study, he found that university administrators used union-avoidance methods nearly identical to those of private businesses when faced with union drives by faculty. For his doctorate in sociology at the City University of New York Graduate Center, he combined ideas of Karl Marx and George Herbert Mead to study the influence of less-alienated labor on intergenerational mobility in a working-class community. His present research concerns academic labor in an era of changing higher education. He currently lives in Rochester, New York, and is an associate professor of sociology at Rochester Institute of Technology, where he teaches social and cultural theory, sociology of work, social inequality, and foundations of sociology.

Sarah Smith is the pseudonym of a millennial white woman who spent her childhood growing up in a suburban trailer park in the Midwest. A first-generation college student from a low-income background, she

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Alecea Ritter Standlee is a first-generation Ph.D. and college professor. Raised in poor rural communities by low-wage service workers in the Pacific Northwest, Alecea found her niche in higher education. After completing her undergraduate degree at the University of Idaho, she worked for multinational computer company, Dell Inc., but quickly realized her passion was in education. She would go on to earn a Ph.D. in sociology from Syracuse University, as well as an M.A. in women's studies at the University of Cincinnati. Her dissertation, "The Real Virtual World: Techno-Mediated Relationships in the Lives of College-Age Adults," conducted under the supervision of postmodern theorist Prof. Jackie Orr and feminist scholar Prof. Marjory DeVault, explored how communication technologies are used to establish, negotiate, and maintain interpersonal relationships. This experience solidified her commitment to principles of inclusion, social justice, and active scholarship. As a qualitative researcher, Alecea believes that giving voice to underrepresented research participants will yield robust and valuable data about the social world. Today, as a professor at Gettysburg College, she specializes in teaching and research in the areas of social theory, gender, sociology of technology, and social inequality, with a particular emphasis on the impact of first-generation status on the college experience. Her current scholarship examines the social and cultural implications of communication technologies on the role of socio-economic status, gender, and geographic location in the formation of interpersonal relationships and complex social networks.

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Mauricio Torres is a doctoral candidate in sociology at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. His areas of expertise include race and ethnicity, law and punishment, education, and affect. In addition to the chapter featured here, he is the coauthor of "Trayvon Revisited: Race, Fear, and Affect in the Death of Trayvon Martin," along with Mary Cannito-Coville and Dalia Rodriguez. His dissertation, titled "Leaning In: Diversity Work and Campus Culture at a Quaker Boarding School," interrogates the complexities of diversity work in the context of Quaker education and its limits as an anti-racist project.

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INTRODUCTION

Alecea Ritter Standlee

The 21st century, though not long underway, has already become an era of paradigmatic shifts in the culture and experience of higher education, especially in the Western world. Higher education in the United States, for example, is in the midst of great transformation. Even as higher education becomes ever more essential for lifelong success, the cost of college is increasing. Financial support for public institutions has declined, and student financial aid burdens graduates with more debt than ever before. These shifts are fundamentally linked to the history of increasing accessibility and decreasing exclusivity of higher education in the latter half of the 20th century. As a result of shifting social expectations and the rise of egalitarian philosophies of education, institutions of higher learning have worked to provide a more diverse and less stratified experience for students and faculty, making higher education more accessible to more students. At the heart of this transformation is the first-generation student. In order to understand this transformation, it is essential to discuss what first-generation and working-class status means, as well as some of the specific challenges students with this status face in today's academy.

Before we consider the challenges and controversies that surround first-generation students and faculty in higher education, we must first

address a matter of definition. On the surface, first-generation academic status is easily defined: it applies to graduate students and faculty whose parents did not graduate from, or perhaps even attend, college. Yet this group is deeply diverse and profoundly complex. Traditional intersectional frameworks that link together social class (which may function as a proxy for first-generation status), racial identity, and gender identity are a useful starting point for defining first-generation students. However, seeking to better understand the experience of the first-generation student requires a much more complex approach. While in some cases class status can provide insight into first-generation status, specifically for poor and working-class individuals, no simple correlation between these terms can be assumed. An educated parent may be financially successful or destitute, and their education may have taken place at an elite university or a struggling community college. Similarly, a less educated parent may be financially successful, thus allowing a very different educational experience for a child than a financially desperate parent could provide. Furthermore, racial identity, especially if coupled with immigrant status, may be profoundly impactful for first-generation academics. Due to the diversity of intersectional identities among this group, it is difficult to articulate a universal experience, though the authors in this volume effectively express shared experiences among many, if not all, first-generation scholars.

To further compound this complexity, many authors in this volume have elected to utilize a culturally specific class identity that in some cases functions as proxy for their first-generation identity. The identity of “working class,” like “first generation,” carries with it a host of meanings, some of which include undertones of racial identity—often whiteness—within the highly contested political environment that we currently inhabit. During the contentious 2016 election year, the discursive identity of “white working class,” which has a long and complex racial history, was again a central tool to maintain racial and class hierarchies. In the aftermath of the election, due in part to partisan media and through the efforts of a revitalized white supremacist movement, the term “working class” became a proxy for a particular brand of racialized narrative. This narrative focused on maintaining racial barriers between working-class whites and non-whites, policed carefully by both poor whites—who faced the decline of their own white privilege, while struggling to deal with class marginalization—and wealthy political elites who benefit from an internally divided working class. Despite the co-option of the label “working class” as a political tool to support racial hierarchies, many working-class

people of all races struggle against this narrative as they enter both the work force and higher education.

In addition, working-class status, as a marginalized identity, may extend to individuals who would normally be excluded from the category “first generation,” in the sense that one or both parents may have completed some form of higher education, but were not able to parlay that into movement up the socio-economic ladder. These “mixed-status” students may experience a cultural environment and childhood socialization similar to more traditional first-generation students, despite some parental familiarity with college. In order to address some of these complexities, we must cultivate a tolerance for ambiguity. Therefore, in this volume, the terms first generation and working class, rather than being constrained by strict definitional guidelines, are allowed to serve as self-defined identity categories. Like racial, religious, or sexual identity categories, first-generation and working-class status are narratively constructed and often contested by the very individuals who define themselves as such. In addition, evolving social and political contexts add to the shifting nature of these conceptual frameworks. At times, this means that contradictions and slippery abstractions may emerge in the volume. Yet if we value the voices of first-generation and working-class scholars themselves, as well as the knowledge gained through research, such discursive slippage must be embraced. Discursive flexibility is essential to knowledge generation in this evolving field, as the diverse contributors (and, in many cases, their research participants) attest.

Definitions notwithstanding, much recent research has been done on the experiences and challenges faced by first-generation and working-class undergraduate students, in both public and private institutions of higher learning. What has emerged is evidence of an educational system that is struggling with the demands and the limitations imposed by a changing political environment and by shifts in the demographic makeup and cultural identities within the student population. From the perspective of the first-generation student, the challenges and demands of entering the higher educational environment are immense. Some of these challenges are the result of external forces that target higher education with attacks that are disproportionately visited upon the historically marginalized, including poor and working-class first-generation students. The recently passed 2017 tax bill, which pays for tax cuts for high earners and corporations in part by targeting higher education, along with the massive budget cuts to state-supported public colleges and universities we have

seen in recent years, undermines accessibility to college for first-generation and low-income students. This trend has begun to reverse some of the educational gains made in the late 20th century. As educational access and upward mobility become more difficult for the poor and working class, anti-intellectualism and distrust of science and information grow—as does, not coincidentally, income inequality and the power of social and political elites. Today, working-class and first-generation students, even as they struggle to adapt and internalize the social norms of their new educational environments, continue to face difficulties shaped by regressive forces that seek to undermine higher education as a means to maintain social hierarchies and concentrate power into the hands of a few.

Research in this area has made profound contributions to general knowledge about the experience of first-generation students, especially undergraduates. Committed institutions have developed programs to better support the needs of this group, and lobbyists and activists have worked to push back the rising tide of anti-intellectualism that endangers access to quality higher learning for all students, including those in the first generation. At the same time, graduate students and faculty members from first-generation and/or working-class backgrounds face profound disconnections and challenges as they enter the academic job market. The experiences of graduate students and faculty members have been less comprehensively researched than those of undergraduate students, and the goal of this volume is to contribute to the emerging field of study in this area. Unlike undergraduates, who, while they may struggle to adapt and succeed, generally view higher education as a temporary—albeit profoundly transformational—life stage, many graduate students and most faculty members view higher education as their life's work. In order to understand their experiences, it is necessary to look at the interactions between both the individual and his or her class status, the institutional expectations and norms of individual colleges and universities, and the broader social environment of higher education. In order to understand the experience of the first-generation and working-class graduate students and faculty members represented in this volume, it is useful to begin with a discussion of the broader cultural environment in which higher education, and those committed to it, are situated.

Situating Higher Education, Past and Present

Historically, the United States has been a leader in educational innovation. This is, no doubt, in part because of the complex relationship between

public education and civil society. That an educated public is necessary to allow for effective and informed participation in the democratic process is not a concept that originated in the United States, but nonetheless has informed federal and state support for education since the creation of the earliest public schools. Yet even as public primary and secondary education were embraced by educational activists and reformers in the 19th and 20th centuries, higher education remained, in many ways, the province of the rarified social classes.

Access to higher education has been denied again and again to marginalized groups within American society. Women and people of color have been viewed as unfit to enter the hallowed halls of knowledge, and have faced opposition, both explicit and implicit, in accessing higher education. Yet educational institutions arose to meet the needs of those otherwise left out in the cold. Women's colleges and Historically Black Colleges/Universities played an essential role in allowing access to higher education. Higher education has functioned as a gateway to middle- and upper-class lifestyles, imparting intellectual gifts as well as financial and social capital on a select few. Despite these emerging spaces of inclusivity, educational attainment for marginalized racial groups remained well below that of their white counterparts for much of the 20th century, while women remained underrepresented in many fields. A major reason for the persistence of these inequalities is evident in their intersection with class status.

For the poor and working class, educational attainment remained low throughout the early 20th century, though whites and men did slightly better than other groups. Thus, in the middle of the 20th century, demands for fundamental transformations in higher education emerged. Access to educational resources led to the ability to more directly engage in civil society, and the demand that the benefits of higher education be extended beyond the middle and upper classes to the poor and working class began a new transformation in higher education. The demands on educational institutions, communities, and governments were reflections of an era of civil and cultural engagement, when change was embraced and social upheaval was normalized. Higher education responded with varying degrees of enthusiasm, but doors previously closed to the poor and working class opened, and higher education became a space in which students who benefited from intergenerational transmissions of educational privilege sat side by side with first-generation students, who were, fundamentally, strangers in a strange land.

This change in access led to a fundamental shift in the cultural view of higher education. No longer a space of exclusivity, higher education has become increasingly important for long-term financial and career success. Yet, as is often the case when a space of privilege is made available to the marginalized, it becomes subject to delegitimization. For example, when women enter a previously masculine-dominated work space, the status and financial rewards of that industry tend to decline. This reflects a cultural misogyny that associates femininity with being “lesser.” Higher education is increasingly inhabited by women, people of color, and the poor and working class in the form of first-generation students. As a result, higher education has been targeted by individuals and groups who, unable to maintain the elitism of the space, have focused on devaluing it.

For most of its history, higher education represented, at its core, the expansion of the human mind and scientific development, the encouragement of intellectual curiosity, and the cultivation of a flexible mind. Effectively, the goal was to foster a broad set of knowledge and skills that allowed for long-term career success, deep and profound engagement in civil discourse, and personal happiness. In response to the demands for access to and equality in higher education, political actors, beginning with Ronald Reagan and today including a significant majority of conservative political figures, began to characterize higher education, not as a means to develop a comprehensive understanding of the universe, a space to develop a profound life philosophy or to make scientific discoveries that contribute to the sum total of human knowledge, but rather as a means to get a job. Furthermore, attempts to undermine educational quality, especially in public higher education, have taken the form of pressure on institutions to present speakers with no scientific or educational merit on equal terms with luminaries in their field. The effect of these transformations has been to deny the historic benefits of higher education to women, people of color, and perhaps most completely to the poor and working-class students who fought so hard for access to these benefits, even as it stabilizes and even expands the concentration of power among elites. In the current social environment, explicit attacks on higher education have had profound consequences. A 2017 study of social attitudes found that over half of all registered Republicans consider higher education harmful to the country, and support for educational budget cuts as well as increased taxation on institutions and students has grown. States across the United States have cut budgets to higher education, forced the hiring of business leaders as university presidents, and

undermined educational freedoms in the form of political attacks and the removal of tenure protections. Meanwhile, current federal government leaders have proposed increased taxes on colleges and universities, implemented cuts to and limitations on student lending and, as this volume goes to press, are working toward widespread cuts to public education as a whole. Such successful attempts to increase barriers to education have become increasingly successful, resulting in a concentration of power among the wealthiest and most politically powerful citizens. This allows for the increasing control of elites over financial, political, and discursive realms, rendering higher education and the media, which have historically functioned as sites for democratic discourse and the transmission of knowledge, as embattled resisters or even co-opted tools of the powerful.

At the same time, we have seen the normalization of cultural discourse that calls into question the value of higher education, creating a narrative that focuses increasingly on credentialing and applied labor, specifically for the working class. While upper-class families continue to consider high-quality education a necessary part of their world, poor and working-class families are increasingly encouraged to view education as either a credentialing barrier to a regular income or an unnecessary indulgence. This discourse also constructs higher education, specifically the liberal arts tradition, as not simply elitist, but destructive to working-class identities and culture. Higher levels of education have long been linked with socially progressive attitudes and a decline in discriminatory behavior, and political actors who work to maintain social stratification have seized upon this reality as a means to undermine the value of education by defining it as propaganda. The consequences of these events cannot be overstated, as first-generation and working-class families have increasingly internalized the notion that education is a useless hoop to jump through at best, and undesirable or even harmful to people at worst, rather than as a means to a more stable, healthier, and happier life. As education becomes less accessible due to limitations on financial support, and less desirable due to discursive constructions that make it seem worthless or destructive to working-class and poor families, first-generation students who do enter higher education face significant barriers to their success.

In this ideological struggle about the meaning and nature of higher education, the first-generation and working-class student has become the site of conflicting narratives. On one side, social and political actors normalize the idea that the first-generation and working-class student is most in need of, and demanding of, a career-focused trajectory that values credentials and efficiency over knowledge generation and acquisition. The

other side of the philosophical divide argues that what first-generation, working-class students need and want most are the foundational educational resources that foster intellectual curiosity and critical thinking, both of which have been at the root of higher education since antiquity. Faced with this narrative conflict, and struggling with a hostile political environment, institutions have responded in a variety of ways. Some have adopted a vocational, career-focused model, moving away from the ideal of a comprehensive education—as evidenced by the decline in support for general education curricula and the rise of educational models that focus on rapid degree completion rather than quality of instruction. Others—most commonly elite institutions—have in effect demanded class assimilation from new students, implicitly communicating expectations that student conform to upper-class norms of behavior and adopt upper-class cultural identities in order to succeed. Such institutions can become cultural monoliths profoundly alienating to first-generation and working-class students.

Institutions whose social norms and identity are rooted in a history of upper-class, elite culture can find their traditions and expectations under attack, both from groups that question their elitism and from groups that challenge the value of their educational goals. One response may be to resist changes in culture and defend age-old institutional traditions. This can impose demands for conformity that are challenging for all individuals within the institution, but profoundly so for first-generation students, faculty, and staff. For example, collegiality and departmental “fit” often require that faculty and grad students demonstrate class conformity through their knowledge of art, music, and international travel, as well as their skill in adopting upper-class customs in social situations like formal dinners and cocktail parties. Upper-class expectations about conflict management styles, self-promotion, social networking, family and work structures, and physical appearance and dress, can shape perceptions of fit and belonging for first-generation faculty and graduate students. All of these factors can play a role in how successful graduate students and faculty are in securing grants, finding appropriate mentorship, and advancing within the profession.

Thoughtful institutions will attempt to create genuine flexibility in accommodating a changing student and faculty population, and continue to provide quality comprehensive education in the true liberal arts sense. Institutions that work to include diverse race, class, sexual, and cultural identities within their faculty and staff, as well as within their curriculum,

provide a more positive and welcoming environment. Some institutions require courses that address diverse class and racial experiences, while others maintain theme housing or student support groups for first-generation, nontraditional, and other marginalized populations. Focusing on inclusion and support not only helps first-generation students succeed, but also fosters a more diverse, adaptable, and emotionally intelligent student body and faculty culture.

Whatever their strategies, colleges and universities across the country have faced profound changes, many of which are linked with the rise in first-generation, working-class, and other previously excluded groups. Even as institutions of higher learning struggle with both the real differences in their increasingly diverse student bodies (both graduate and undergraduate) and faculty, and the pressures imposed by external actors seeking to preserve cultural exclusivity, students and faculty members also struggle with new cultural and social expectations, many of which are currently in flux. Faced with conflicting demands to support free speech and condemn hate speech, to embrace diversity but also welcome conservative outlooks, faculty and students may experience a kind of intellectual paralysis. At the same time that they struggle to support and integrate first-generation students, institutions are faced with political and financial coercion to reinforce and even recreate barriers to upward mobility. Furthermore, faculty and students find it difficult to navigate a first-generation and working-class identity increasingly controlled and defined by a small group of anti-intellectual and anti-equality figures. To date, relatively few scholars have written on the difficulties faced by first-generation and working-class graduate students and faculty in academia. This volume seeks to provide an outlet for innovative research and personal narratives in this area. Here we find mentors and peers sharing the strategies that have allowed them to survive, and sometimes thrive, in academic settings across the country.

Understanding the Experience of Working-Class Faculty

As many of the researchers and essayists in this volume discuss, first-generation and working-class academics often find themselves in a liminal space, negotiating transitions and conflicts between the upper-middle-class norms of their peers and work environments and the norms embedded in their working-class histories. While the scholars represented in this volume approach the experiences and needs of working-class and first-generation academics from a variety of perspectives, taken together they provide a

rich discussion of the issues surrounding higher education in general and class-based challenges in particular.

The first section focuses on first-generation career academics—those who have spent, or are poised to spend, their working lives in higher education. Engaging such issues as work environment, marginality, social capital, and educational background, these contributors provide a profile of the contemporary first-generation faculty member, conveying a deeper understanding of the unique challenges faced by first-generation professors and academic professionals as they work and teach within the academy. In this discussion, we see several key elements central to understanding the experience of working-class and first-generation faculty members in higher education. They articulate the fundamental truth that higher education is shaped by its history as a middle- and upper-class environment. The social and cultural norms of higher education are, at a very basic level, a reflection of the cultural norms of upper-middle-class Americans.

In Chapter 1, Vincent Serravallo explores the fundamental challenges of moving into and across the cultural and class boundaries of higher education. As a working-class academic—that is, an individual from a working-class home who has now entered the rarified heights of academe—he effectively describes the very real cultural differences and challenges faced by such class transgressors. Jim Vander Putten also engages with the challenges of class transgression as he addresses the transformational role educational experiences in the lives of college faculty from working-class and first-generation backgrounds.

Michelle Tokarczyk brings together the issues of first-generation and class status by addressing the complex interactions among her own lived experience, the institutional norms of a liberal arts college, and the tensions that exist between institutions and faculty members as a result of class difference. Meghan Pifer and Karley Riffe's chapter investigates the perceptions of academic work within the academy as they are articulated and understood by working-class and first-generation academics, as derived through a content analysis of their self-reflective writing. Among the most profound of their findings is the degree to which working-class academics struggle with the kind of inter-class border crossings that Serravallo so ably delineates. Together, these chapters provide a powerful picture of the cultural environment of academic workers and highlight some of the ways in which social class plays a profound role in success and survival.

As Serravallo and Pifer and Riffe discuss in detail, the social norms of

higher education are often fundamentally different from the norms of working-class Americans. This can have profound effects on working-class and first-generation academics' mobility within an institution. Failure to effectively conform to social norms may lead to the kind of interpersonal conflict between colleagues that can damage departments for decades. Furthermore, any attempt to introduce working-class norms into an institutional culture can be viewed negatively not only by colleagues, but by students and administrators. Working-class academics run the risk of being viewed as "difficult" or "gauche," which can have long-term career impacts.

Yet "passing" as upper-middle class, which involves conforming, is not without its risks. At times, establishing the trust needed to build social capital within one's new class environment can mean the abandonment of old bonds and the unlearning of skills previously considered essential. In effectively passing as a member of the elite, working-class academics are encouraged to entirely differentiate themselves from other members of their birth class. Furthermore, as Tokarczyk notes, working-class and/or first-generation academics may also experience "imposter syndrome." The persistent sense of not belonging has both personal and professional consequences. This section provides a comprehensive and thought-provoking assessment of the challenges faced by the working-class/first-generation faculty members within the academy. For those interested in entering this environment and who will engage in class transgression to do so, the experience can be both challenging and rewarding. Graduate school is the entry point and "makes or breaks" their professionalization as academics.

Graduate Students and Academic Professionalization

The second section of this volume is devoted to the experience of academic professionalization and graduate school socialization. These contributors focus on addressing lived experiences of graduate students as a labor force, as students, and as individuals engaged in the difficult work of reshaping their understanding of the world. The scholars represented in this section have worked to identify and articulate an academic culture in which the demands and the limitations imposed by changing educational environments are disproportionately visited upon the historically marginalized, including poor and working-class first-generation graduate students. Within an increasingly competitive and challenging environment, first-generation students, who lack the social capital of many of their peers, face unique challenges. As working-class and first-generation

graduate students engage with the process of academic socialization and professionalization, they experience not only new expectations and new modes of social and intellectual engagement, but also experiences that conflict with their own sense of identity and values.

Kathleen Mullins explores the experiences of working-class graduate students, challenging conventional narratives rooted in individualistic explanations of these academic success stories, while also identifying important “resilience factors” such as access to strong K–12 educational programs, emotional support, and lived experiences that foster responsibility and self-discipline. She challenges the notion of a universally positive experience in these supposed success stories, arguing that graduate school confronts first-generation students with high expectations for acculturation to the norms of academia. As a result, cultural differences that are accepted in undergraduate students become increasingly difficult to manage for students at the graduate level.

David Marquard elaborates on this theme, examining the narratives of working-class graduate students who experience their engagement with the culture of academia as a frustrating experience of “outsider status.” Highlighting issues such as anger and shame, he addresses the emotional and narrative consequences of this marginalization, as working-class graduate students struggle to fit into their new environment. Mullins and Marquard both address experiences of loss rooted in family and class identity, and the sense of marginality experienced by working-class graduate students inside the classroom and within academia in general.

Faculty and academic professionals often expect graduate students to be comfortable with the social and cultural discourse of higher education, and with the middle- and upper-class environment in which it has historically been situated. Elvia Ramirez expands upon this issue, discussing the ways in which not only class and first-generation status, but also race and ethnicity, play a profound role in academic professionalization. Addressing the personal experiences of Latino/as and the institutional norms and expectations that surround them, Ramirez effectively illustrates the sense of marginality experienced by working-class students in general and by working-class students of color in particular. She notes how cultural practices normalized within higher education can create an environment of hostility for first-generation Latino/as that is rooted in both race and class differences.

The writing team of Aaron Hoy, Marcus Bell, Selene Cammer-Bechtold, and Mauricio Torres further this discussion by analyzing the

specific structures that make the academy a foreign and even hostile place for working-class and first-generation students, and for students of color. The neoliberalization of higher education has fundamentally reshaped higher education in ways that have profound impacts on both daily practices and career trajectories. As first-generation academics, the authors of this chapter acknowledge the ways in which their experience of the academy is shaped by the increasing focus on professionalization and consumerism, with a corresponding decrease in attention to the creation of knowledge. Yet they also ably articulate the ways in which acknowledging such forces in no way keeps them from being subject to them.

JanRose Ottaway Martin provides a comprehensive discussion of the “leaky pipeline,” the educational phenomenon that occurs when certain populations, most notably women, people of color, and working-class students decline in educational participation at increasing rates that correspond with higher levels of education. Malar Hirudayaraj wraps up the section by addressing the consequences of the “leaky pipeline” as she addresses the ways in which the challenges and institutional structures discussed in this section can result in working-class and first-generation students being forced to opt out of higher education altogether. Ottaway Martin and Hirudayaraj both address the consequences of shifting cultural expectations and access around educational attainment, while also acknowledging that many improvements must occur to provide all students with the real benefits of higher education, especially at the graduate level.

Surviving and Thriving in Academia

Finally, in deference to the power of narrative voice and the profound ways in which the silencing of a population or group can be an act of violence—a means to take away individual voice and with it, the right to self-definition—the final section of the book is devoted to the narrative voice of the marginalized. This section provides personal essays from first-generation students and academics themselves, granting insight into the struggles and strengths of living and working in an unfamiliar landscape. These chapters give the reader insight into the lived experience of first-generation academics, while providing practical advice for survival and success.

Sarah Smith and Saran Donahoo tell us powerful and compelling stories that take us on journeys real and imagined. Smith discusses her journey from extreme poverty to a career in higher education, and Donahoo uses the allegory of Dorothy and Oz to emphasize the profound

importance of social capital in the form of mentors, peers, and institutional support mechanisms. Finally, Rosanne Ecker and Taren Swindle discuss some of the practical ways in which academic institutions and first-generation and working-class students themselves can mobilize support and resources. Ecker describes a range of programming initiatives to support first-generation graduate students, while Swindle offers a practical guide to networking and acculturation for the same population. This section of the book provides a more immediate sense of what it is like to live and work as a permanent resident in a strange space during a time of transformation.

Moving Forward

Taken as a whole, this volume asks and perhaps even answers some profound questions about higher education, from the perspective of a population that is simultaneously both “insider” and “outsider.” The struggle of higher education in the 21st century is rooted in such questions. How, for example, do we make higher education a space simultaneously welcoming to the needs of the historically marginalized and resistant to the forces of neoliberalization and delegitimization that are levied against it by powerful actors? How does one embrace the institutional values and expectations of knowledge work, while still maintaining the connections and values that come with a working-class identity? How do we resist the array of social forces that are working to undermine educational access—discursively, politically, and culturally? As working-class and first-generation students and faculty members enter the hallowed halls of higher education—not as travelers moving through, but as settlers who will be leaders—we must think deeply about our own road to success, and how our identities and experiences can reshape and, in some cases even preserve, the core values of our new home. As women, people of color, and those from the working class enter higher education, we face profound challenges, yet bring with us possibilities for profound transformation.

The authors in this volume discuss strategies and tools for confronting the challenges of higher education, and also highlight some of the battles we face from both inside and outside the walls of the academy. There is no question that in welcoming the marginalized, higher education has opened its doors to transformation, even as it faces resistance from forces that seek to recreate hierarchies and protect concentrations of power. Working-class and first-generation academics must be leaders in

shaping that transformation, both to open the path for those who follow and to reject the forces that would use our identities to undermine higher education, denying the real benefits of knowledge to the breadth of the population. The challenges higher education is currently facing are mirrored within the United States more broadly. Powerful political forces promote the delegitimization of scientific knowledge and a general sense of anti-intellectualism as a means to police class borders and reinforce boundaries of power. Ultimately, this volume seeks to provide first-generation graduate students, faculty members, and their allies and mentors insight into the changing face of higher education and the unique challenges faced both by newcomers to the academy and by the “outsiders within.”

1

Changer in Paradise Escaping Marginality and Shaping Academic Labor

Vincent Serravallo

Consider Norman Frost. This is not his real name, but he was the first in his family to get a college degree, and in the late 1960s he became an economics professor. However, when asked to discuss his experience of moving up into academia, he tells us he is not fully living out what most would agree should be a happy success story. Instead, he describes an inner turmoil involved with his trajectory: “Being a working-class academic is sometimes very lonely. It’s difficult to relate to most colleagues, but it is also difficult to relate to working-class folks, who tend not to trust you since you got to be a ‘Doctor’” (Ryan and Sackrey 1984, 257).

Frost’s experience is not unique. In actuality it is typical of a pattern of experience shared by many first-generation academics from working-class backgrounds. No fewer than five volumes—published between 1984 and 2006 and based on full and composite narratives of 138 academics—illustrate this pattern.¹ They overwhelmingly describe tremendous anguish and ambiguity involved in their achievements. Their testimony describes in stirring detail the major challenge for those like us who are pioneering their path to the university: the difficulty of crossing the borderline of social class and class culture. As first-generation academics, you will be joining a professional occupation composed mostly of people whose

lifestyles and temperaments are not only very different than ours, but hold sway as the standard we must meet. That is the borderline separating what the subjects see as two separate worlds.

However, several of these narratives comprising the literature by and about first-generation academics contain clear counter-views. While acknowledging the difficulties of crossing the borderline, many subjects also expressed a will to confront and overcome this predicament. For example, let us consider Nancy LaPaglia, a humanities professor from a working-class family: “Although I recognize that dissimilar domains exist, I want to be everywhere. I am not actually alienated from either sphere—the working class or academe. I am not simply rebelling against one position or another. I am opposing fixity and trying to have the best of both worlds” (Dews and Law 1995, 185–86). Thus, while the upward mobility of first-generation academics from working-class origins is fraught with unease, not all aspirants accept it as insuperable, and many attempt to outfit their new academic world with what they see as the commendable features of their old world.

I will address the realities of both Frost’s and LaPaglia’s experiences, but I will focus on the latter, the attempt “to have the best of both worlds.” Put another way, I will suggest ways to achieve a working life in the academy that is more in your control. Let me first discuss in more detail the two representative statements.

Marginality, Habitus, and Hope

The first statement, by Frost, is a crucial forewarning. It depicts the inner malaise resulting from a life between and betwixt two worlds, the working class and the academy. There is overwhelming consistency in the narratives of those contributors to the literature who succeeded in attaining a tenure-track academic position: they see themselves as long occupying an unhappy location somewhere on the borderline of the old world of their origins and the new world of their professional destination, of having a foot in each world but being strangers in both.² They poignantly describe an anomic predicament characterized by such now-familiar glum metaphors as being “caught in the middle,” “in limbo,” or “far away from home.” They feel they are impostors, unable to achieve complete class assimilation and uncertain about even wanting to.

Robert Park (1928) was among the first sociologists to reflect on this condition.³ He identified the “marginal man” as a personality type associated with racial and ethnic group members whose international

migrations simultaneously placed them in the terrains of home culture and host culture, but who felt at home in neither. Characteristic traits of marginality included “spiritual instability, intensified self-consciousness, restlessness and malaise” (893). Contemporary students of social class continue to examine the symptoms of Park’s marginal man, but reconceptualize them within the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Bourdieu refers to particular dispositions, tastes, and lifestyles as *habitus*, a powerful subculture that emerges from the material conditions of social class. Those attempting to move into a new position face a new habitus while the old habitus continues to exert its hold. Bourdieu refers to this as a “cleft habitus” (Lee and Kramer 2013).

The familiar imagined territories of old world (origins) and new world (academe) actually represent two different and opposing social relationships: the working class and the professional-managerial class, each with its distinct dispositions, roles, and power.⁴ Credentials and good work might bring the aspirant from lowly origins to the doorway of a professional position, but due to the workings of social class and class culture, he or she is not prepared to embody the new dispositions, perform the new roles, and exercise the new power as is expected of all members of the new world. The professional-managerial class habitus that dominates the academy is difficult to master for many of those not born into it, and this is by far the most common obstacle identified in the literature.⁵

Park and Bourdieu, however, did not perceive marginality or cleft habitus as deterministic and fixed. Park recognized the creativity and change that migrations of racial and ethnic groups offered their host countries, and Bourdieu held that habitus may change or reshape the conditions from which it arose. The second statement above, by LaPaglia, evidences this. She believes she is “not actually alienated from either sphere—the working class or academe.” Recent research on college undergraduates from working-class origins suggests that her claim is not unique (e.g., Lee and Kramer 2013). While the marginality problem that first-generation academics have discussed over the past 30 years is powerful, it is not necessarily insurmountable. Many of these academics have tried to escape the marginality trap and make a contented life in the new world. I will use my experience as a first-generation tenured professor from working-class origins to develop these “escape plans” primarily for the benefit of those just starting their full-time (or temporary full-time) academic appointments, but much of what I outline will benefit graduate students as well. Before I formally present my suggested strategies,

though, let me begin with a small personal example.

Challenging Gauche with Class

Soon after I received tenure, my chair asked me to organize the department holiday season collection for our secretary. I had happily contributed each year since being hired, and never failed to note the significant transition this represented in my life: the once very poor graduate student was now lending financial support to an assistant! However, a colleague with an Ivy League background said something to me that reminded me of the class-cultural differences that my above-the-national-median salary did not overcome. The pool of cash reached triple digits, and I opted to do what had been customary for my extended family and friends: give her the cash—the “long green with the short future,” as my backroom-gambling hometown neighbor put it. This did not sit well with my Ivy League colleague, whose parents are college graduates, one a professor. “That’s so gauche,” the professor smugly protested with wrinkled nose.

This professor is a good person with a sharp and creative mind, but I took this as a stinging affront on my class character—a clear statement that I was too low-mannered for the ways of the professoriate. So, I asserted my areas of expertise (sociology of work and social inequality), appeals to social justice, and my working-class customs to firmly yet civilly make several points: that our secretary did not have the luxury of a professor’s flexible work schedule to drive to the mall in the event a gift had to be returned; that while our faculty politely interacts with the office staff, we do not form relations close enough to know their tastes in gifts; that office staff, who do not have incomes as high as those of faculty, most likely find cash much more practical than some gadget. And I informed my colleague with much pride (and via anecdotes) that cash-giving was a normal practice for many people with working-class origins—one that might recall the joys of children getting handed a few singles spontaneously by an uncle simply because he had not seen them in a few weeks. I turned the situation around and made it clear that elements of middle-class culture would not set the standards of my workplace. Later, I informed my colleague that our secretary happily told me that cash was perfectly fine.

Since then, there have been other such incidents too numerous or too subtle to recall in detail, but my ability to escape marginality and reshape my “paradise” (as Ryan and Sackrey would have it) grows as the months and years go by. Let me use my experience to suggest how you too can

accomplish this. I will start at the general level of academic work, offering some foundational insights for maneuvering within the world of academia, and will then move to the more specific, day-to-day aspects of an academic position.

Our Roots, Your Roots

You might be the first in your family to become an academic, but you are not *the first* first-generation academic. Fortunately, you have predecessors, and they have confronted the challenges and felt the trepidations you might now experience. You also have your personal background of achievements in your particular academic endeavors. Draw on your own experiences and those of your predecessors.

Learn from Our Predecessors

My first suggestion is that you read, as early as possible, the books that have focused directly on first-generation academics' experiences, beginning with the earliest of the lot, *Strangers in Paradise*, by Ryan and Sackrey (1984). *This Fine Place So Far from Home* (Dews and Law 1995), *Caught in the Middle* (Grimes and Morris 1997), *Reflections from the Wrong Side of the Tracks* (Muzzatti and Samarco 2006), and *Working-Class Women in the Academy* (Tokarczyk and Fay 1993) also provide abundant lessons from first-generation academics whose common background nonetheless admits variation by sex, sexuality, race, age, and geography.

The narratives provided in these texts are thoughtful accounts that will help you better articulate your unique predicament and create the academic future you want. All of my information about first-generation academics in this essay is based on this literature and my own experiences.

Read and discuss the books in reading groups composed of your first-generation colleagues, including graduate students. You are likely to form bonds with academics who share your origins. As Julie Cannon puts it, they are likely to “*know* what life on the other side of the tracks is really like” (Muzzatti and Samarco 2006, 108; emphasis in original), and since life on that side varies, you will gain further insight into your own experience by knowing theirs.

Moreover, because the texts explicitly discuss such issues as social class, social mobility, gender, bureaucracy, subculture, intersectionality, and organizational power, they will enhance the coursework of graduate students—especially those in the social sciences—and may inspire ideas

for a course paper, poem, song, film, master's thesis, or dissertation. Junior faculty members might be inspired to conceive and design research projects.

We Are Not Impostors

To enter academia is to enter various realms: your particular discipline, our wider occupation of college professor, and your particular academic workplace—plus their respective subcultures. Trepidation in entering all three areas has marked the experiences of those from working-class origins. They often claim to feel like impostors, pretenders, fakes, or spoilers, and they fear they will someday be found out as such. Many believe they lack the abilities involved in the everyday expectations of their academic job, and feel ignorant of or unsuccessful at performing the lifestyles, dispositions, and overall presentation of self associated with academicians as a class. As one subject in Grimes and Morris's study put it: "As a professional sociologist, I have always felt like an outsider to the profession. This lack of fitting in stems from two sources. First, I have always felt academically less well prepared than most sociologists.... The second source of alienation comes from life in a strange [class] culture" (1997, 143).

You can avoid this predicament by honestly acknowledging your abilities. By this I certainly do not mean to suggest that you engage in an inspirational campaign of self-affirmation; I do not suggest that you will be smart if you repeatedly tell yourself you are smart, or that you must believe that being born into the working class was a blessing for your future.⁶ Instead, you must remember that you passed high selection standards to be admitted into graduate school in the first place. As the chair of the Sociology Department at the University of Kansas pointedly told me when I expressed self-doubt, "You wouldn't *be* here if you weren't capable." As a new faculty member, you must acknowledge that your accomplishments and experiences got you the offer of a tenure-track job, which dozens or hundreds of other applicants did not get. You must also consider that your candidacy was sponsored by letters and perhaps phone calls from renowned authorities who believed in your abilities.

To confirm your competencies, revisit some of your past work, such as a class paper, master's thesis, dissertation, computer code, creative works, or peer-reviewed publications. You could also review the awards or public acknowledgments you have received for service to the community, the discipline, your university, or someone's research. At times you might

cringe over something you wrote or did, but it is more likely that you will take pleasure in your proven competencies.

Windows on Academe

Becoming an academic involves much more than attaining expertise in an area of concentration. It demands socialization into an occupational subculture. Regardless of discipline and the particular school in which they work, academics constitute an occupational subculture. They share a specialized language, carry out familiar rituals, and agree on certain norms, beliefs, and values (Rothman 1998, 44–61). This is true for most occupations. As a seamstress in the “shops,” for example, my mother was a “sleeve setter” who had to “fill the bobbin” for every new “bundle” she got, and might have to work on “repairs” found by the “trimmer.” In the academy, the “tenure-track” professor who got the “new line” due to her “strong CV” will often have to teach fewer “new preps,” and have a “lighter load” while on “probation.” When I pumped gas in the days of “full service,” we all believed that customers in old clunkers tipped more than those in luxury cars; most academic departments are guided by an opposing belief that applicants from prestigious universities are the best job candidates. Masons value the good workmanship of their brick walls, and professors value the scholarly work of searching for knowledge. Just as firefighters create and share norms about how to save lives, and home health-care aids share norms about how to care for the infirm, professors share norms for how to teach, do research, and deliberate department and university business.

Every academic department in its particular school will manifest a unique combination of features of the wider occupational subculture. This is the workplace subculture, and I will discuss this further on. But when considering the professoriate as a whole, there are important organizations and organs that are very helpful for socializing the newcomer to the dominant language, values, and norms of academe.

AAUP and The Chronicle

One organization you should become familiar with is the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). Established in 1915, the AAUP is the national association promoting the interests of the academic profession. As described on its website (<http://www.aaup.org>),

The mission of the AAUP is to advance academic freedom and shared governance; to define fundamental professional values and standards for higher education; to promote the economic security of faculty, academic professionals, graduate students, post-doctoral fellows, and all those engaged in teaching and research in higher education; to help the higher education community organize to make our goals a reality; and to ensure higher education's contribution to the common good.

This organization will inform you of the elementary shared beliefs and language of the academy and provide position statements on existing and emerging issues. It was instrumental in promoting the modern idea of tenure, and its statements on academic freedom and governance are highly regarded by faculty members, administrators, and policy makers. “Collegiality” is a concept currently affecting many academic workplaces, and the AAUP has written a position statement on it. This is of special concern for first-generation academics, due to the common claim that working-class life does not prepare one for, and is at odds with, the gentle art of debate between colleagues.

One of the most important publications on academe is *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Published weekly during the academic year, and daily in its online version, *The Chronicle* provides news, information, opinions, and discussion forums on nearly every aspect of academia. It is read and discussed by administrators and faculty members alike. If you cannot afford a subscription, your department or the dean's office most likely subscribes, and it is probably in your school's library. A related source is *Inside Higher Ed*, a free online newsletter and blog.

Needless to say, you should not automatically accept the AAUP's views, nor should you substitute the AAUP for other advocacy bodies, such as unions. You would be best informed if you complemented *The Chronicle* with other publications on higher education that provide more depth and alternative views.⁷ But familiarity with the AAUP and *The Chronicle* will help you to become informed about the major issues and debates in the profession, so you can speak intelligently about them, and will help you absorb the basic beliefs and language that mark the occupational subculture. Escaping the impostor self-image and making your place in academia will follow from the confidence and authority you can develop from these resources. There is always the possibility, moreover, that once more at home in academe, first-generation academics from

working-class origins could be part of a movement to reshape the academic subculture.

The Innards of the University

Hundreds of students enter a college or university and leave about four years later with a degree. The work that goes into scheduling their classes, teaching their classes, determining their grades, deciding their financial aid, feeding and housing them—and that is just a short list of their needs for completing their degree—is overwhelming. This feat is accomplished because the school is a complex organization comprised of many parts, rules, and overarching values. The structures (offices, departments, councils, governing bodies) are guided by rules (policies and procedures), all of which are shaped by wider values (such as articulated in a mission statement), and this set of relationships makes the “machine run” regardless of a school’s unique qualities, such as student population, Carnegie classification, endowment size, or the personality of its president. Learning the structures, rules, and values of your particular school and academic department is essential for an easy transition into your studies or your job, and for giving your input on how it works. In this section I will focus on the social structure of the college; I will discuss work at the department level further below.

Your Place in the Social Structure

Rather than seeing yourself as entering an intimidating academic monolith, consider that you now occupy a position, such as assistant professor, within a complex but ordered group. Read the history of your institution, preferably published by a historian, to get an overview of the organization you are in or joining. Then, learn about how the school “works.” Examine your school’s organizational chart to learn the major units. Institutions of higher education are typically divided into two main spheres: finance and academics. The former includes such departments as budget, human resources, and financial aid. The academic division, where most of our time is spent, includes the office of the president and other senior academic administrators, including provosts and deans. There are several units making up the academic division, such as student affairs, academic affairs, and some form of an academic or faculty senate. Within these bodies are countless committees charged with carrying out the school’s academic business. Find your place in the organization and

identify the major committees of the various units and their duties. You might be informed of these structures during an orientation for new hires.

Among the important structures are the governance bodies. The basic elements of academic labor—teaching and research—are shaped and strongly guided by policies and procedures created by large and small governance bodies constituted by academics. A common refrain of academics is the need to “just do my work and not get involved with university politics.” This attitude is based on the myth of academic individualism. The academic cannot work in isolation from his or her colleagues and governance bodies. Doing one’s own research project, for example, is often shaped by policies on human subjects, internal and external grants, release time, and many others; these policies are formed by governance bodies. If faculty members do not participate in such groups, they will face policies given to them by administrators. By the time you can serve on governance bodies that formulate such rules, you will not only feel more at home in academia, you may be in a position to remodel that home.

A faculty senate (sometimes called an academic senate or faculty council) is the typical governance group representing the faculty, and it is essential that you familiarize yourself with its bylaws, including those concerning membership. The minutes of senate meetings are often made public, and it would be worthwhile to review them to get a sense of the pressing issues of the day and the debates about them.

All of the divisions, committees, and governing groups shape the school’s operations, but the school’s board of trustees has the final decision-making powers. Typically, trustees will hail from the business world, and will likely be older, white males with high incomes. Few if any academics will be among them. See who the members are to get a sense of how your school is directed.

A union may be another structure in your academic workplace. About one-third of professors nation-wide are union members. If your school is unionized, learn the union bylaws, study its contract, and know your union representatives. It would also be helpful to learn how the school became unionized, and about the union’s history.

Know the Rules and Use the Rules

Your work and the work of the various groups and committees in the school are guided by formal policies and procedures. Read your university’s policies and procedures manual or bylaws, as they will provide

the official rules on nearly all aspects of your work. This includes not only the rules about tenure and promotion, but about many other important elements, such as the charge and membership of institution-wide standing committees, the various faculty ranks and their duties, grievance procedures, academic conduct, intellectual property, attendance, foreign travel programs, final exams, graduation requirements, grading and grade disputes, salary, retirement, and so on. The purpose of reading the bylaws is not to become your school's policy wonk, since the complexity and detail of the typical policies and procedures manual are overwhelming. Instead, the purpose is to help you speak more authoritatively about the important issues that arise or know where in the policies one would look to get the official word on an issue. Without this knowledge, you may feel aloof and further disinclined to interact with colleagues on important matters. Ryan and Sackrey well understood this:

One way to cope as a newcomer anywhere is to learn the rules before the bumbs [*sic*] on your head get too large and too many. To some, such a strategy of acceptance and achievement also demands a rising-to-the-occasion of playing at others' rules as well as or better than they do, particularly to keep from feeling overwhelmed, inferior, incompetent, or all three. (1984, 131)

Regarding the benefits of “playing at others' rules as well as or better than they do,” it is crucial to know how to use the rules that academics use, or claim to use, to conduct their meetings: *Robert's Rules of Order* (Robert et al. 2000). It is a long, complex book that few have mastered or even read from cover to cover, but its main elements are crucial for making the first-generation academic feel more in control in the academy. Since the typical school will implicitly affirm the dictum that it is an “institution of laws, not men,” *Robert's Rules of Order* may serve as a leveling agent—preventing class background or habitus from bearing any advantage—since the rules of conducting business apply equally to all. Potentially harmful strategies that we might find in an informal meeting, such as grandstanding, bullying, and steering the deliberations for personal interests, are not allowed when *Robert's Rules of Order* are followed.

A final point to keep in mind about rules: you will find that in many cases, actual practices (often called traditions) will sometimes vary from the official policies. The formation of and compliance with informal rules in the academic workplace is important, and I will discuss this in a later section.

College Values

All of the units and the rules that guide them are informed by wider values agreed to by your university's leaders. All schools promote the value of an educated person, but schools will vary regarding what aspects of an educated person they will stress. Some might value "career education," while others stand for "liberal learning for the public good." All institutions will have some form of a mission statement, and it is important to read it so as to learn the major values that guide your institution.

The values proposed in the mission statement also shape the long-term planning of a university. A university's official plan for the next five or ten years is usually known as its strategic plan. Read the current strategic plan and see who was involved in creating it. While often self-congratulatory and marked by hyperbole—and generally used to gain funding—the strategic plan does inform the faculty of the school's priorities in such areas as curriculum, enrollment, learning, and research. A plan, for example, that calls for more interdisciplinary programs, more external grants, and more diversity, may shape an academic department's expectations, and thus help determine whether or not you will get support for your research plans or your ideas about designing a new course.

Your Department

The academic department is a workplace that requires direct and long-term relations with departmental colleagues. It will have its formal and informal norms, specialized language, and shared beliefs that help workers know how to do the work. This is the workplace subculture—a localized version of the occupational culture. The point, then, is to conduct the same kind of review of your department's bylaws and committees as you do for your university.

However, no matter how detailed and deliberate, a department's formal policy has some degree of ambiguity and thus is open for interpretation—hence, the role of informal norms created and shared by the people with whom you most closely work. "Candidates for tenure must provide evidence of effective teaching," a formal department policy might state, but departments and tenure committees have gone to war over what constitutes "effective" teaching. As a result, tenure candidates and their assessors share informal expectations, such as attaining generally high ratings on student evaluations, the exact number for which varies by department. Departments are not likely to have formal rules about grant-

ing a break time during class, but you will soon be told explicitly or learn indirectly through observation and hallway talk about what is the “rule,” if there is one. The same goes for attire, assessment methods, course material, office hours, how to deal with unruly students, grade disputes, and so on.

One of the primary features of the occupational subculture of college professors is professional autonomy. It is expected that we will independently determine our pedagogy, course syllabi, grading policy, and selection of research topics. In fact, a common finding in the research on first-generation academics is that they are most at home, and feel less marginality, when in the classroom or when doing research. Such professional autonomy must never be taken for granted.⁸ Nonetheless, there are helpful limits to such autonomy. For example, you will benefit from the informal norms of seasoned colleagues regarding how many pages students should be asked to read or write, and what is the “right” number of tests to give. Thus, if norms in your department are not clear, explicitly ask your department colleagues what is expected for your performance: How much reading is to be expected of students? Is it customary to give breaks at the mid-point of class? Is there an agreement about students’ use of laptops and other online devices during class time?

Contested Academic Cultures

Learning the aforementioned enables you to maneuver in your work with more authority (especially since relatively few academics possess all this information), and it provides you greater opportunity to change your workplace subculture; after all, subcultures are constructed and therefore can be changed. For example, my self-esteem rose considerably, and I felt much more at home and in control of my life, when I was elected to be the moderator for the monthly meetings of the approximately 140 faculty members of the College of Liberal Arts, while not yet tenured. Carefully reading and applying *Robert’s Rules of Order*, I set the parameters for discussion and often directed or silenced senior colleagues from higher class origins during deliberations.

In another instance, while serving on the university budget committee I used my knowledge of *Robert’s Rules of Order* and my academic concentration areas to challenge proposals that I felt disadvantaged students from low-income families. Two or three outspoken committee members wanted to cut costs by eliminating student financial aid to qualified students applying for high-demand majors. It is highly unlikely that these academics came from lower-income backgrounds. “We have a large number of

students wanting to enroll in programs that have a great placement record, so we don't need to offer them financial aid," they argued. The other committee members nodded in agreement, and the chair was ready to accept the proposal without a vote. However, I asserted the elementary rules of conducting a meeting and made the chair ask for a motion, provide time for deliberation, and call a vote. As in the instance of my "gauche example" above, I asserted my knowledge of social inequality in higher education's admissions policies to argue that such a proposal would exclude qualified but low-income students and thus rob them of their dreams solely because they were low-income. Alas, my objection to the proposal was outvoted, but I had it formally included as the dissenting view in the committee's published recommendations to the president and the entire university. When the issue came before our faculty senate, the president acknowledged my point as crucial for maintaining the right balance between diversity and budget. My effort did not revolutionize my school, and we do not yet know how the administration will decide on the matter, but it does demonstrate that ideas from first-generation academics that promote the interests of first-generation students can be put on the table as legitimate items for university-wide debate, using the very processes and policies practiced by the university. Had I not been familiar with those processes and policies—and had I not pursued membership on the committee—economic background would not have been identified as an issue.

The growing areas of contention in higher education present opportunities to build on the work of our first-generation predecessors. Examples include the focus on family income as an aspect of diversity, and the extension of the tenure probation period for having or adopting a child. Other trends open to debate include the emphases on instructional technologies, research, global education, interdisciplinarity, collegiality, and job placement. Along with knowing the rules and structures that make the university machine run, make good use of your experience as a first-generation academic from working-class origins to help shape (or curb) the future of these trends.

Cultural Divides at the Individual Level

My preceding suggestions—reading the literature on the experience of first-generation academics, acknowledging your accomplishments, and learning the structures, norms, and values of the profession and the workplace—make but the foundation on which to confront the major

challenge: relating to a new social class culture. We must deal on a face-to-face basis with the individual people who occupy positions and are agents of the policies and values guiding our academic workplaces. Most often, these individuals, your colleagues, demonstrate great ease in the academy. They embody proper academic behavior and attitudes as a result of the anticipatory socialization they received at the hands of parents and educators. You must interact with these colleagues seemingly born to the academy. This interaction is often unnerving and sometimes intolerable, but always inescapable. These are the colleagues who formally assess your performance and judge your progress; ultimately, they decide your future. Your “hard” record of achievements in the areas of teaching, research, and service may or may not be sufficient for favorable overall judgments of your performance—but your interpersonal abilities are sure to be an important unofficial criterion. Nor do the anxieties of social interactions always diminish as one’s career advances; most of the first-generation academics whose pain of marginality has been reported in the literature have attained tenure, and several have advanced up the academic hierarchy into administrative positions.

No Faking It

My first general suggestion is that you realize the power of habitus, and avoid the tendency to fit into the professional class by mimicking its members and masking your origins. Accept the reality that full assimilation into the academic class is unlikely. To the extent that academic culture is understood to connote middle- or upper-class status, membership in this culture cannot be faked. Many first-generation academics have attempted a two-pronged strategy of masking the stereotypical ways of their old world while mimicking the ways of those in the new. Some, like Donna LeCourt, feel they were good at it:

With such attempts at mimicry, I successfully rewrote myself and my thinking.... [I]t extended beyond schooling to trying to revise eating habits, conversational patterns, the way I dressed, even how I decorated my apartment.... I also learned how to “mask” working-class markers well—a skill I still employ when I believe the context demands that my appropriately professional and middle-class face appear: the cocktail party at the job interview; the seemingly innocuous dinner where I know to leave sports, television and the heated political debate at home; the reminder that admitting where I received my undergraduate education will immediately diminish

me the eyes of my interlocutor. My body learned in these years how to move in professional-class ways: how to dress, speak and socialize differently; what to say and what to silence. Although I no longer seek a complete masking, I learned much in those years about what I risked when the mask slipped and how to consciously choose when that slippage might occur. (Muzzatti and Samarco 2006, 93–94)

Self-conscious mimicking and masking, as the above statement represents, is qualitatively different from the “code-switching” required of all of us as we move within and between many different social settings. Taking the role of the other, as George Herbert Mead (1934) explained, is a necessary part of socialization in general. Learning the elements of professional-class culture by close observation is vital in anticipating your colleagues’ responses and demonstrating your ability to integrate into your workplace. You may take comfort in realizing that you have been engaged in this sort of thing for many years since entering school (Lehmann 2014). Indeed, some of the recent commentators have made reference to and applied W. E. B. DuBois’ (1994 [1903]) notion of double consciousness to their experiences of the class divide (Moses 1995; Cannon 2006).

Deliberate imitating and suppression as described by LeCourt, however, is of a different order that demands a great deal of energy and stress to maintain in the long term. LeCourt herself hints at the need for never-ending attention to managing the risk of being found out. Thus, it is important not to fall prey to insincere and exaggerated efforts of self-presentation. In addition to the constant stress, it denies the source of unique power and talent your origins offer for your work and for academe in general (Granfield 1991). To repeat, full class assimilation is very unlikely, but as I hope to demonstrate, it is also neither necessary nor desirable.

Collegiality

Collegiality is a broad and complex term, but I will use it in the practical sense of interaction norms for faculty members of all ranks in various formal and informal settings. In simple terms, we recognize collegiality as the expectation that we interact with politeness and respectfulness of others’ views and ideas. Passions are tempered by appealing to reason; we may refute and disprove with gusto, but the target is the idea, not the person. Currently, there is a trend to formalize collegiality into written policy, as this section of a 2013 internal “collegiality

statement” from an academic department in my university exemplifies: “We expect that disagreements will be asserted calmly and respectfully, and will not devolve into personal attacks that would undermine the professional reputation of the individual and the department.”

Asserting disagreements “calmly” is perhaps the epitome of academic collegiality, and as ethnographies such as those by Khan (2011), Lareau (2003), and Cookson and Persell (1987) find, it seems to be done with great ease by those with middle- and upper-class upbringings. The common socialization practices of middle- and upper-class parents and the schools their children attend nurtures curiosity, confidence, and reasoning over physical responses: brain over brawn. Kohn and Schooler (1983) identify features of parents’ work as the source of these different socialization practices. Highly paid, prestigious occupations tend to require independent judgment and creative problem-solving, and those in them tend to emphasize these values and develop them in their children. Those in occupations requiring close supervision and regimented tasks tend more to socialize obedience to authority; their work offers them less opportunity to demonstrate to their children the ways of logical persuasion to resolve problems and conflict. Collegiality seems to be inching toward acceptance as an explicit factor in tenure and promotion, as the previously quoted departmental collegiality statement goes on to make clear: “In grievous cases, shortcomings of collegiality may be factored into annual faculty reviews and decisions on tenure and promotion.” In this case, the academic’s career heavily depends on collegiality.

Having witnessed as a small child my father terminated from the area’s largest employer for punching a co-worker who referred to him by an ethnic slur; and having witnessed many uncles use the same technique in smaller, unregulated workplaces; and having witnessed as a teenager my neighbor bawl out and mercilessly slap two teenagers bloody for bullying his sons; and having witnessed as a graduate student my upper Manhattan neighbors resolve disagreements with deadly bullets; and having witnessed as a tenured professor deadly force on the street below my bedroom window (having chosen to make my home in a residential area mixed by class and race); and witnessing throughout my life most family members arguing with loud voices and contorted faces—after a lifetime of watching and expecting conflict to be settled with great emotion and violence, the calm demeanor I am expected to assume as an academic has not come naturally. I favor it as much as my colleagues, and I have come to master it no less than most of them. Still, my colleagues might not need to expend the self-conscious effort to first suppress passion, as I must; it is an ease I

will not likely ever attain.

If your experience is like mine, observe and practice civil debate regularly. You might already be familiar with a variety of physical and nutritional means to promote calm (like yoga, meditation, tai chi, distance running, and substitution of chamomile tea for five-hour caffeine energy shots), and you are likely aware of the extensive literature on the art of listening and rhetoric. However, practicing civil discussion will produce the best results. If time permits, practice by writing out in advance an exchange you will face. You can practice for collegial interactions by engaging in imaginary debate with talk show callers, TV pundits, and so forth.

However well you master the collegial demeanor, know that you have the freedom to integrate styles of interpersonal relations from your origins. Thus, apply as much of your old-world ways of social interaction as will comply with the calmness code. Asserting the wit and color of working-class and folk communicative styles is one of the most commonly mentioned tactics first-generation academics employ for not only integrating with, but enhancing collegial culture. Incorporate some of the civil terms, expressions, and rhetorical devices you have learned from friends and family. For example, as Ryan and Sackrey's informant Douglas Brent (another pseudonym) explains:

Part of being rural is to use colorful figures of speech.... Perhaps it is a way uneducated people use their imagination; they play with language in different ways than do the educated. I grew up in this environment, and have picked up many of the figures of speech. You don't describe someone as simply happy; "he or she is as happy as a pig in a new suit." As the example indicates, many of these are earthy. (Ryan and Sackrey 1984, 291)

First-generation academics have also identified career mobility and self-promotion as alien to their upbringing, and some have become disillusioned with academe because of this. Testifying, perhaps, to Kohn and Schooler's point about the value of obedience in working-class families, they believed they were raised to be humble, to just do their work and let others acknowledge their achievements. Overvaluing humility, however, may jeopardize one's chances for achieving a variety of awards, such as merit raises, research partnerships, tenure, and promotion. If you wish to remain true to modesty, you will have to decide for yourself how much self-promotion you will employ for what you believe is essential for your

academic career. An honest, not “padded,” documented presentation of your accomplishments will satisfy the requirements of your assessors without undermining your integrity. When preparing your materials for an annual evaluation or tenure review, it will be beneficial to include any truthful descriptions that enhance your work. For example, if the editor puts your published article first in a journal, describe it as the “lead-off” article. If you are among others on a publication, describe the amount and importance of your contribution. If you assisted students via long electronic discussions, include a printed copy to demonstrate your commitment to teaching. Do the same for unsolicited favorable emails from students. As any quantitative methodologist will tell you, numbers do not speak for themselves. Thus, high student evaluation ratings or high numbers of students who took the next-higher-level course with you could be explained as examples of effective teaching or significant improvement. You might also apply these honest enhancers when requesting your teaching schedule or committee positions.⁹

Cultural Literacy

By far the most common element of the marginality problem reported by first-generation academics is their ignorance of middle- and upper-class academic culture. For example, as Christine Overall explains: “Growing up in working-class Toronto, I had, unlike my middle-class colleagues, little or no access to foreign travel, classical and contemporary art, dance and theatre, fine cuisine, elegant clothes, middle-class manners, and influential people” (Dews and Law 1995, 215–16). Of course, it can be, and very likely will be demoralizing to attend receptions and dinners during which the topic of conversation moves to the areas Overall mentions. To repeat my earlier claim, you cannot fake the knowledge necessary in these situations. Some first-generation faculty members avoid the agony by not attending such events. Attendance, however, is often required—and may provide a good opportunity to learn. As an academic you will have opportunities to become familiar with many aspects of professional or middle-class culture; take advantage of them.

One increasingly available opportunity for travel is to direct a study abroad program. You might also have opportunities to attend an academic conference abroad. The more time you share the academic workplace with your middle- and upper-class colleagues, the more you are likely to adopt some of their tastes, dispositions, and habits. Thus, when in the company of those with high academic cultural literacy, tactfully probe for clarity and

elaboration—that is, ask questions. To be clear, this is not to feign interest or flatter; it is a good way to develop your knowledge. The longer you remain in academe, the more experience you will gain with questioning colleagues whose interests and work is unrelated to yours. If someone is discussing an obscure topic, ask this colleague to relate it to something that pertains to your field. I might know nothing about nineteenth-century French literature, but I could ask the authority on this topic what if any French-language novels or poems address the issues of, for example, the eight-hour movement taking place in the U.S. around that time, or of labor issues in general.

In an actual situation early in my career, renowned Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree spoke at my university, and I was invited to a dinner in his honor with a small group of colleagues. Ogletree taught Barack and Michelle Obama law at Harvard, and has been on several TV news shows and documentaries. During the dinner, my colleagues and he engaged in lengthy name-dropping of famous lawyers and TV news personalities, and I felt excluded and uncomfortable; it seemed like a conversation out of my league. During a lull in the conversation, however, I mentioned my interest in critical labor law and asked Ogletree about his experience in that area. To my delight, he showed sincere interest in and a great deal of knowledge about this topic. I felt at ease during the substantive discussion that ensued. I am certain that much of this was due to Ogletree's approachable personality, but my query initiated the dialogue.

Conclusion

The growing research on first-generation academics from working-class origins shows a variety of experiences with the challenges of entering academe, and a variety of strategies to attain a successful career once in it. It is true that the marginality problem is a dominant, commonly shared feeling for most of us. After all, academe is a social institution maintained by unfamiliar norms and values that pressure one's thoughts and actions to conform. First-generation academics are new to these pressures and understandably feel out of place, strange, and ill at ease. Some respond by attempting to fully assimilate. We recall LeCourt, who said, "I successfully rewrote myself and my thinking." Muzzatti and Samarco also suggest this strategy when they claim that "the survival, perhaps even more so than the success, of professors from the working and underclasses is highly contingent upon our sanitizing of fugitive knowledge, our obfuscation of class position, and our muzzling of class consciousness" (2006, 79). However,

the experience of most of the contributors, plus my own, testify to the obstacles of a pathway based on constant self-conscious attempts to mimic and fake the norms and values others easily personify. Moreover, sociologists inform us that while the norms and values of academia are powerful, they are not absolutely powerful. First-generation academics have the capacity to challenge, modify, or replace the social forces shaping them, and much of that capacity, what sociologists call agency, is nurtured in our particular life histories—certainly including our working-class origins. Thus, many reject full assimilation. Some, like Ryan and Sackrey's pseudonymous George Puck, believe they can ignore the culture of the academy and attempt to insulate themselves within its sphere. Puck claims,

I spend two days a week on campus.... I *never* visit the office of another professor except when I must do so on business.... In my view, I run my own small college within a university two days a week. The rest of the University can go to hell with itself.... And I think that the institution needs me a great deal more than I need it. (182–83, emphasis in original)

However, Puck himself admits that this approach is possible only for a small privileged class of tenured senior academics in certain colleges. It is also a very individualistic work life, at odds with academia's reliance on group collaboration, interdisciplinary research, and the general social nature of knowledge construction.

Between these two extremes of either total assimilation into academic culture or the complete rejection of it is a pathway that offers hope at both the personal and wider social levels. Some first-generation academics make an effort to hold on to certain elements of their “old world” background and apply them in the “new world” of academe. In this way, one attempts not just to escape the torment of marginality, but to reshape our academic world. It is an approach expressed by Laurel Black: “I am seeking a way to keep the language of the working class in academia, not just in my office with my working-class office mate, to nurture its own kind of vitality and rawness and directness...” (Dews and Law 1995, 25). This orientation seeks to retain within academia the knowledge and experience of the working classes. Of course, there is no monolithic working-class knowledge and experience. There is instead a variety shaped by race, ethnicity, region, gender, occupation, and many other factors. Nonetheless, first-generation academics share an outsider standpoint that can be asserted rather than masked or suppressed.

We should use it to educate our non-first-generation colleagues as well as our students. When I was doing fieldwork for my dissertation on how working-class parents socialize their children, for example, a fellow graduate student and good friend from the upper-middle class told me matter-of-factly not to schedule interviews with these families over the summer because that is when people are on vacation. I informed him that my subjects do not “go on vacation” over the summer or any other time. Trips to visit family in nearby counties and states are common, but vacation as the middle class understands it—a private family excursion—is not part of their lives.

We can use it to raise the consciousness of colleagues by having them confront insensitive classist comments, like I did with a professor who asked a student during class and in front of dozens of other students, “Why don’t you have the [assigned] textbook? Can’t afford it?” White, male, and the son of a medical doctor, he was apparently unaware of the humiliation such a question could evoke, especially in low-income students in an expensive private university like ours.

Depending on our disciplines, we can conceive or enhance our research projects and our classroom lectures by integrating the experiences and ways of life of our family backgrounds. My discipline, sociology, affords me much opportunity of this kind, and most of my formal research examines working-class life. In the lecture hall, I discuss unfair labor practices to exemplify deviance. I show some of the posters and music of the Industrial Workers of the World to exemplify counterculture. And, what better way to teach about intersectionality or the cultural capital of the lower classes than to describe my life growing up in a working-class family? A chemistry professor of working-class origins from my hometown brought into his lectures his family’s informal knowledge of chemicals in their traditions of wine- and bread-making; physics and biology professors could surely do the same.

Asserting features of the “old world” knowledge and experiences assists the individual academic in maneuvering through the marginality dilemma, it raises the consciousness of colleagues about class inequality, and it helps build the confidence of first-generation undergraduates and inspire them to carry on. As you progress in your academic career, know that these three main benefits constitute the paradise of academia as much as do commonly celebrated elements such as the professor’s high occupational prestige and freedom to explore and debate the truth. That is the paradise your unique first-generation biography has the power to create.

Notes

1. Dews and Law (1995) have 26 first-generation academic contributors, Muzzatti and Samarco (2006) 18, Ryan and Sackrey (1984) 26, and Tokarczyk and Fay (1993) 21. The study by Grimes and Morris (1997) involves 47 subjects. All of the contributors in this literature originate from working-class families, but this might not be the case for all “first-generation academics.” Some first-generation professors and graduate students may have parents or guardians who have no college degree or did not attend college, yet achieved jobs or incomes characteristic of the middle class or even the upper class. Small business owners, inheritance beneficiaries, or even big-prize lottery winners are examples. While this presents the possibility of diverse, and more likely “higher” lifestyles and life chances within the category “first-generation academic,” the number in such a group is likely very small. Thus, while “academics with working-class origins” might offer a more homogeneous population, I will use the two terms interchangeably.

2. The most commonly referenced problems of assimilating into the new class culture are rooted in deficient cultural literacy, e.g., a lack of knowledge of world travel, food, and high culture; wrong taste in clothes; weak vocabulary; and improper presentation of self. Some also report difficulties in adjusting to calm and polite manners of deliberation during committee meetings.

3. DuBois (1994 [1903]) conceptualized the turmoil of a divided self in his notion of “double consciousness” well before Park. But DuBois’ formulation was rooted in the circumstances of forced migration by enslavement, not the free migration to another country or the choice to attempt to advance up the class, occupational, or educational hierarchy.

4. The Ehrenreichs’ notion of a “professional-managerial class” serves well to represent academics: they are “salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labor may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations” (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979, 12).

5. There is more to the marginality problem. Ryan and Sackrey believe that academics from the working class also experience the “internalization of class conflict.” As they put it, “It became clear for us that to grow up working class, then to take on the full trappings of the life of the college professor, *internalizes the conflicts in the hierarchy of the class system within*

the individual, upwardly mobile person” (1984, 5; emphasis in original). That is, as members of the professional-managerial class in higher education, first-generation professors help reproduce the structure of class inequality that disadvantages students from their own class background. A college degree, perhaps now more than in the past four decades, is a major factor in attaining prestigious and high-income jobs (Wysong, Perrucci, and Wright 2014, 232–33), and college professors provide that advantage by sorting students via letter grades, letters of reference, and other formal means of evaluation. One possible response is for the first-generation academic to participate in various opportunities for social change, but activism is not commonly accepted as progress toward tenure or promotion. In some universities, however, such activism, if resulting in peer-reviewed publications, is accepted as “engagement” scholarship.

6. On the problems that follow from this line of thinking, see Ehrenreich’s (2009) autobiographically inspired critique.

7. An example is the online, open-access journal *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*.

8. Recent trends in higher education include the emphasis on accountability (e.g., instructional assessments, goals and outcomes), pressure to employ particular instructional technologies (e.g., online courses, flipped courses), a variety of policies that transfer academic judgment to nonacademic personnel (e.g., professional advisors and commercial online student evaluation systems), and strong expectations for team teaching and study abroad. Karp (2003), Slaughter and Rhodes (2004), and Tuchman (2009) are excellent starting points for research on the simultaneous rise of faculty responsibility and erosion of faculty autonomy. The current interest in collegiality may be explained, in my view, as administration’s effort at social control in response to faculty resistance to the erosion of their autonomy.

9. Another aspect of working-class culture that might be part of your background is experience with collective bargaining, and this could be leveraged in certain circumstances in nonunionized schools—for example, with respect to starting salary. If a school has formally offered you a job, and states your salary, you are in a position to consider reasonable negotiation of the salary, along with other expenses, such as moving and office equipment. Of course, this assumes you have first done research on the prevailing wages for both the locality and for your rank and discipline nationally. Your proposal might be rejected, but you can try.

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5

First in Line The Experiences of First-Generation, Working-Class Graduate Students

Kathleen Mullins

The challenges college students face when they are the first in their families to access higher education have been well researched. Scholars have called attention to the multiple identities inherent in first-generation status and to the significant cultural transitions and resulting marginality that first-generation undergraduate students often experience (London 1992; Orbe 2004; Terenzini et al. 1994). Student affairs professionals have responded by creating high school-to-college bridge programs, academic interventions, and mentoring projects designed to support first-generation undergraduate students and to ameliorate their disadvantages. In spite of these efforts, and even when controlling for other persistence and attainment factors, first-generation undergraduate students are more likely than non-first-generation students (those whose parents have a bachelor's degree or higher) to earn a college degree; 20% of first-generation students obtain bachelor's degrees compared to 42% of students whose parents hold bachelor's degrees (Redford and Hoyer 2017, 11). Even though a significant number of first-generation undergraduate students do persevere and obtain postsecondary degrees, they are again underrepresented at the graduate level, where only 3% of first-generation students will earn a master's degree or higher (Redford and Hoyer 2017, 11). As we will see, graduate programs typically offer fewer resources to help them with the

continuing challenge of navigating cultural transitions and addressing issues of marginalization based on socio-economic class.

Statistically, first-generation, working-class students are underrepresented in graduate programs. This fact, when coupled with the high attrition rate for all graduate students, puts first-generation graduate students at a disadvantage when compared with their peers whose parents attended college. In terms of student growth and development, first-generation graduate students continue to face the same personal, interpersonal, social, and cultural issues that they grappled with as under-graduates. Multiple identity issues may become more salient as students integrate new identities, such as graduate student, teaching/research assistant, and scholar. Additionally, as the scale shrinks from large undergraduate courses to graduate seminars, and as relationships with faculty members become more intimate, the gap between the cultures of home and the university widens, cultural transitions may become more demanding, and feelings of marginality can become more pronounced.

In spite of the abundance of information on the experiences of first-generation college students during their undergraduate years, very little research has been done on the experiences of these students when they enroll in graduate programs. However, a wealth of first-person narratives provides a look into the personal and professional lives of first-generation academics, both Ph.D. students and professors. Much of this work focuses on issues of socio-economic status—particularly working-class status (Dews and Law 1995; Linkon 1999; Rose 1989; Ryan and Sackrey 1984)—and incorporates the voices of people of a wide variety of races, ethnicities, genders, abilities, sexual orientations, political beliefs, and religious practices. Present in many of these narratives are stories of cultural transitions and marginality that increase in complexity as the student's level of academic study becomes further removed from his or her family's educational experiences. These poignant narratives of working-class, first-generation doctoral students and academics supplement the research about first-generation undergraduates, highlighting the importance of providing ongoing support for these students. However, no one has collected the stories of first-generation college students who enrolled in terminal master's degree programs. This study begins that conversation.

Methods

In 2005, I conducted an applied research project as a requirement for my graduate program in Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education

at Western Washington University (WWU). My qualitative study examined the experiences of nine students in masters' programs at WWU who were the first in their families to go to college. I identified the students through snowball sampling, using personal connections on campus who shared my call for participants with their students and colleagues, which led to a recruitment chain of study participants recruiting other students as well. The students were between the ages of 24 and 42; five were men, four women; seven identified as white or Caucasian, one as American Indian, and one as biracial. They are identified in this chapter with pseudonyms. Their graduate programs were primarily in the social sciences and humanities, including history, education, English, and psychology.

My interest in this topic was grounded in my own experience as a first-generation college student and my first graduate-school experience when I was completing a master's degree in English Studies in the mid-1990s. At the time, I had no name for the phenomenon, but I was consciously struggling to cross an ever-increasing cultural chasm between myself and my family and friends, and I sometimes felt out of place in the rarified academic environment where my fellow students seemed so comfortable. I found many of my personal experiences validated and reflected in the research and first-person narratives about first-generation college students.

After reviewing the literature and conducting a 90-minute, in-depth interview with each of the students in this study, I came to believe that the issues of cultural transitions and marginality do not disappear when students finish their undergraduate programs. It seemed logical to me that the dissonance and challenge may, in fact, increase with each progressive foray into higher education. I do, however, agree with Mark Orbe (2004) that some first-generation students have enough familial "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977) to lessen the impact of transitions and marginalization. For example, first-generation students who have the cultural capital of being white, male, of traditional age for their degree programs, and/or middle or upper class may have more advantages than other first-generation students.

As higher-education professionals, we know that first-generation college students are underrepresented in graduate programs. We also know from our experiences with first-generation undergraduates that college requires students to navigate cultural transitions to address marginalization. If we want to encourage the persistence and nurture the resilience of first-generation graduate students—particularly first-generation, *working-class* graduate students—we will need to listen and respond effectively to

their stories. While first-generation students from all socio-economic backgrounds undoubtedly face challenges in higher education, working-class students often face particular challenges related to the cultural differences between their working-class family experiences and their new path to an ostensibly middle-class life as the result of post-baccalaureate education (Hurst 2012, 130). Susan Borrego reminds us that we have the ability and responsibility to “help students tap their unique class position as a source of power” (2003, 7). This power is not only an essential resource for students in their individual educational pursuits, it also allows them to make an important contribution to the academic learning community.

Resilience Factors

First-generation, working-class graduate students are higher-education success stories in many ways. They have defied the statistical odds not only by persevering to earn a bachelor’s degree, but to join the ranks of the academic elite: scholars in pursuit of graduate degrees. Instead of focusing on the adversity that first-generation, working-class graduate students might face, this study looks at the strengths that they bring to universities. Borrego writes, “the idea of overcoming barriers falls short of embracing aspects of working-class culture that students bring with them to the academy” (2003, 5). Focusing on the need for services instead of the enriching contributions these students bring to higher education “reveals the class bias of those who conceive and carry out the research” (Borrego 2003, 5). With this critique in mind, I have chosen to focus on the strengths of these students instead of their challenges.

Crucial to this project is the concept of educational resilience, which focuses not on an individual student’s abilities but on attributes or factors that can be encouraged in all students. Psychologists have studied the construct of resilience—a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity”—since the 1970s (Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker 2000), prompting educational researchers to start exploring the concept of “educational resiliency” (Wang, Haertel, and Wahlberg 1994). In their comprehensive review of several decades of research on educational resilience, Waxman, Gray, and Padron write that the construct of “educational resiliency” is “not viewed as a fixed attribute but as something that can be promoted by focusing on ‘alterable’ factors that can impact an individual’s success in school” (2003, 1).

The students I spoke with shared several factors related to their K–12

education that contributed to their educational resilience: attending schools that offered Advanced Placement (AP) classes, challenging curricula, an affluent parent population, and teachers who expected *all* students to go to college. One student in my study attributed his decision to go to college to a family relocation. John said,

We moved into a rich area.... We were a lower-, maybe lower-middle-class, blue-collar family, and we're surrounded by white-collar, upper-class people, and I think I really was influenced. Maybe not right away, but by junior high, definitely, I would have said college was in the picture. And then in high school it was sort of assumed. You have to go. If you want to make something of your life, you have to go to college.

In addition to the resilience factors that came from quality K–12 education, the majority of the first-generation graduate students I interviewed benefited from a tremendous amount of emotional support from at least one parent. However, this support was general, not specifically academic. These were not the highly pressured offspring of the middle and upper-middle class. For the most part, parents were proud of these students' accomplishments and pleased with their abilities, but they did not push their children to succeed academically. The support the participants described is more akin to encouragement than coaching. Parents of first-generation students who successfully navigate the narrowing pathway to the highest levels of higher education are fans in the bleachers rather than coaches signaling from third base. While the study participants often desired what parent-coaches have to offer, they were grateful for the encouragement and emotional support their parents provided. As Victor said, "They left it all on me. Everything was on me. I was in charge of my own destiny, and they pretty much said, 'Do what you can do ... and we'll support you as we can.'" Jessica put it this way: "I didn't know how to play the game. My parents didn't know how to play the game. So it wasn't that they weren't supportive, but they just had no real practical support to offer."

Sometimes parental support came from a sense of missed opportunities. "They've been both very supportive," said Victor, "because they wanted to go to school but they couldn't." This particular family valued education so highly that they dedicated more than half their income to sending their children to a private elementary school. The tuition bill was prioritized over the basics, at times. Victor said, "I'll never forget.... There

would be times we'd come home and the only thing we had was mustard and bread, so we'd have, you know, a mustard sandwich!" When asked why he thought education was so important to his parents, Victor replied, "They realized that they were working their tails off and not getting paid much, and they didn't want us to go through that."

Clearly, many of the students in my study had supportive family members. However, aside from general advice to "go to college," these parents did not have specific directions for their children. Several of the students recognized their family's inability to provide specific and knowledgeable advice about education long before they started the college admissions process. Two subjects described the challenge of getting help with homework. One joked that his mother was probably happy to get remarried because someone could finally help him with his math homework. Another participant, Sarah, said,

Even in high school when I needed help with stuff like math or reading or, you know, writing a paper, I could never turn to my parents and ask them. If I did, there was sort of a blank look. And so that was always really difficult, so I always kind of figured stuff out by myself.

Many of the students in the study also described themselves as avid childhood readers, but there was a sense that they may not have read the "right" books. One subject, Cole, said, "My parents, I guess, weren't high culture or anything like that. Books that I should have read as a child.... I'm not saying that they didn't encourage me to read.... I'm just saying they might not have read X, Y, Z." Several participants wondered aloud during the interviews what it would be like to have parents who were well-educated professionals—particularly doctors, teachers, or professors. How would family discussions have been different? What books might they have read, or read with a richer understanding? Now in graduate school, these first-generation students have started to see and understand the advantages of students whose parents graduated from college.

Having a strong work ethic was a third resilience factor that the students in this study shared. One of the most compelling insights to emerge from the interviews was many of the students' adaptation of a working-class work ethic to an academic environment. For some participants, this was characterized primarily by their "in and out" approach to their studies at WWU. "I am the typical commuter student," related Victor. "I just show up to go to school, do what I need to do, go home to study and then do my job." Another interviewee had a similar experience

in her undergraduate studies. Jessica said, “I didn’t spend a lot of time socializing with the other students. I tried to be very efficient about getting in, getting my work done, and getting out on a daily basis.” These attitudes are reflected in the literature as well. Terenzini and a team of researchers (1994) found that first-generation students might not become engaged academically or socially on campus because of family or work obligations, as well as a lack of familiarity or comfort with college culture.

Other study participants were more aware of their work ethic when they compared their own behavior to that of their peers, particularly in terms of responsibility. Jessica said, “I guess I see it as an inadequate work ethic [in other grad students]. Insufficient sense of responsibility.” When asked about the differences between first-generation students and those whose parents went to college, Victor said, simply, “Hard work and discipline. That’s about it, because I don’t feel ... I don’t walk on campus going, ‘I’m the first in my family.’ I don’t think like that. I just think, I work hard and am disciplined.” Some interviewees identified graduate school as the first time they encountered equally hard-working peers; others maintained that they still noticed a difference between themselves and their non-first-generation peers in relation to a sense of responsibility and work ethic.

Several of the study participants related this sense of responsibility and personal work ethic to their socio-economic class background. Cole said, “I don’t know if that has to do with class ... but I think it’s just a result of your upbringing. That’s kind of how I was trained. I transferred how my father works into how I work in class....” He went on to make a possible connection between social class and college behavior:

I think it’s maybe an intellectual outlook, and it could be a result of upbringing or whatever, but when you see people skipping classes and you see all these people that are there [at school] to be there and their parents pushed them in because that’s what’s *expected*. There’s an expectation to go to college. I mean, I wasn’t expected to go to college.... I could have easily gone into college at ... a technical school.... So I think there’s an expectation there. I think students from working-class families ... they kind of pull themselves up. They take initiative. They do all these things, because they know they have to work and work hard and things might not come easy for them....

Finally, a work ethic and sense of initiative empower some students to take control of their education. Keenly aware of the financial sacrifices

higher education entails, these students take graduate school very seriously. Jason observed,

The working-class graduate students I've run into, we exert a lot more independence and self-reliance than the average student. We're not just going to be pushed in one direction. We're going to do this because this is what we're here to do. This is my graduate program, I'm spending my money, I'm doing this.... So I think we have a lot of independence compared to the other students.

My study tried to determine the factors that encourage the persistence in first-generation students who pursue master's degrees. Choy reports that the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988–2000 revealed that first-generation college students “tended to report lower educational expectations, be less prepared academically, and receive less support from their families in planning and preparing for college than their peers whose parents attended college” (2001, 10). What makes some of these students resilient and able to overcome the odds stacked against them as students whose parents have not graduated from college?

The interviews I conducted revealed that the resilience and persistence factors in the lives of first-generation students in master's programs are significant. Many of the study participants benefited from attending high-quality high schools and from having financial resources (whether in the form of family support, federal financial aid, or teaching assistantships) that made higher education a possibility. However, none of these advantages can completely account for their success against the odds. Central to their ability to persist in graduate school is their aptitude for academics, their love of learning, and their personal motivation to push ahead. Their motivations varied, from a desire to be of service to others, to a strong pull toward socio-economic upward mobility, to an insatiable intellectual curiosity. These motivations were powered by strong work ethics and nurtured by supportive family members. However, crossing over to graduate school required that these students to negotiate multiple identities, cultural transitions, and issues of marginality. All these complexities make the bridge from home to graduate school (and back again) a difficult one to cross.

Cultural Transitions

Like most graduate students, the participants in this study share a passion for learning and a great enthusiasm for their subjects. They enjoy dis-

cussing big ideas and concepts. Ironically, what they love results in an often unwanted distance from the family members who have encouraged them to attend college. The biggest cultural challenge facing the students in this study was that of bringing their identities as graduate students and scholars home. When describing her graduate student identity, Jessica said, “I think it’s definitely more of an issue at home than it is here [at school].” For many participants in the study, bringing their intellectual identity home simply didn’t happen. While they value the support and respect the intelligence of their family members, several of the subjects expressed disappointment about no longer being able to talk with their parents or other family members about issues or ideas that are important to them.

Talking about family members in a critical light was not easy for most of the interviewees; they were often quick to point to their family members’ intelligence, skills, and wisdom. However, the intellectual distance between the participants and their family members is clearly a source of loss. The life of the mind is a central aspect of these students’ identities, and not being able to share that with family members means that parents do not get to know the richness of their son’s or daughter’s life. Conversely, students who feel unable to bring their full self home miss an opportunity for potentially meaningful connection. The gulf between these students and their high-school-educated parents becomes even wider as they proceed through graduate programs. Victor described the phenomenon this way:

When I’m at home, I’ve gotten to the point where I can’t talk academically with my mom or one of my mom’s best friends.... They’re very intelligent and very well read for only having a high school education. There was a time when I could talk to them about literature and academic subjects, but now I’ve gotten to a point where I’ve eclipsed them. And I miss being able to talk intellectually with my mom’s friend.... Very smart woman, and I remember last quarter telling her what I was studying and all she could say was, “Oh my.” She couldn’t *add* anything to it, whereas she used to be able to do that. And so I’ve eclipsed her in that regard. [In] lifetime wisdom, never.

Sarah expressed the same feelings of surpassing her family intellectually but honoring the differences in “lifetime wisdom” or “life knowledge”:

I go home, and I almost feel like I have to dumb myself down. I don’t want to step on my mom’s toes because I feel like she has a

lot of life knowledge that I could never compare to, but there's a lot that she does as a parent or even as an individual that I feel like I've surpassed her on, and that's hard. Because how do you interact with a parent that's supposed to be on a higher level than you when you feel more intelligent than them sometimes?

Both of these students raise difficult questions about the intersections of personal and familial life. Their sense of loss highlights the challenges inherent in trying to negotiate this cultural transition. Rather than express frustration with their family's inability to "keep up," some participants in the study learned to limit academic talk at home, thus showing a reluctance to change family relationships or to find ways to invite parents and siblings into their new academic world.

One subject said that he noticed a shift in his at-home conversations once he started graduate school. Christian's anecdote below illustrates the difficulty first-generation graduate students face when they want to bring their new identities and ideas home.

I guess I'm "smarter" than my parents, again in quotes, because my parents aren't dumb. They have very specialized professional knowledge, but coming home, you don't really come home and say, "Man, there's a Marxist dialectic going on in that right there" on the television, on *CSI* or whatever they're watching. They'd say, "*What* are you talking about, son?" And even if I'm not being really serious about it, it's fun to joke or just to talk like that. In the classroom we joke like that. With your peers, with my brother, I can joke like that because he's in college. But when I go to Mom and Dad's, I try to turn that off because I don't want to make them feel stupid. I don't think they necessarily will, but I don't want them to think I'm talking down to them.... Sometimes I might start a conversation and they just won't know so they can't really talk back. They just say, "Okay, that's nice, son. I don't know either."

What *do* these students talk about at home? "When I come home, I leave a lot of school behind," said Cole. Like other subjects in the study, he explained that going home was a vacation from graduate school. When Cole goes home, he talks about the things that "everybody talks about." He explained by adding, "I come from a very rural area, so I would probably be more apt to talk about if they saw elk or deer or something than how many term papers I did or what they were on." In a similar vein, Victor observed, "At home, the intellectual and educational level, I leave

that behind. What I learned, yeah, I still use that, but I don't talk about that in specifics. At home, it's more about family. Family and work."

Clearly the biggest and most emotionally difficult cultural transition that these students make is between home or family and graduate school. The parents who have cheered from the sidelines have achieved their goal of higher education for their children. Their children are educational success stories. But, as Carolyn Leste Law wrote about her own transition from her working-class family to her doctoral program, many of these students have suffered a loss; their education has "destroyed something even while it has been re-creating [them] in its own image" (Dews and Law 1995, 1). No longer able to engage in fulfilling intellectual dialogue with family members, some first-generation students in graduate programs turn to faculty and fellow students, only to discover unexpected marginalization in the classroom.

Marginality

It is probably safe to say that graduate students, in general, are fairly comfortable with their academic abilities after having highly successful academic experiences as undergraduates. The students in my study did not express anxiety about competency or competitiveness; indeed, they seemed secure in their academic performance. Yet several participants described a discomfort with the culture of academia that they struggled to overcome (even to the point of abandoning plans to apply to doctoral programs), others shared stories of marginalization based on socio-economic class or political affiliation, and many observed that their working-class background necessitated significant linguistic adaptations.

These experiences of marginalization may directly or indirectly influence students' decisions to move on to doctoral programs after completing a master's degree. At least one participant has found the culture of academia is so unwelcoming and undesirable that he has chosen not to pursue a career in higher education. "I don't want to get a Ph.D.," Jason said.

Quite simply, I'm not like those people. And I just, I don't think like them, I don't... I certainly don't talk like them. I just feel uncomfortable with them.... I mean, they feel tangibly different than me, and certainly tangibly different from the people I usually associate with. Even if those people have gone to college and are working and things like this, they are fundamentally different. And whether or not that's due to economics—that probably has a lot to

do with it—or whether or not they’ve just been out and seen more things than I have.... That’s certainly true, too, but those two things certainly go together.

When describing a professor’s regular queries about the world travel habits of the students in a particular class, Jason said, “You really get the distinct impression that you’re not worldly enough.”

Another classroom interaction left an indelible impression on Jason, who described his reaction to a professor’s casual, offhand story about visiting what happened to be Jason’s hometown. This incident captures not only the specifics of what marginalization *looks* like but also the powerful impact it can have on students.

This little voice in the back of my head said, “You just described the vast majority of my entire family, and you just described them as beer-swilling, Republican-voting hicks.” I didn’t say anything. I just kind of sat there. I mean, what was I going to say to that? And ... that bothered me. I mean, it *still* does. Am I somehow separated from that just because I’m sitting here listening to you [the professor] talk about Marx and then I’m throwing in Derrida into this conversation? Is it because I’m conversant with these things that I’m somehow different? Or is there that possibility of me just backsliding into this beer-swilling, you know, gun-rack-havin’ caste. I mean, that’s exactly what it is, it’s a caste.... And I think that’s one reason I keep saying they’re different than me. Is this something that they want to beat out of me or get out of me, somehow? Or is it something that I should let go myself? Or is it something I should hold on to?... That episode just hit me across the face.

Was this professor aware that students in his class might share the cultural background he was ridiculing? Was the attack intentional? Most likely not. Since class differences within the student population—and within the faculty ranks—are rarely addressed directly in higher education (Borrego 2003; hooks 2000), unconscious class bias comes as no surprise. Since higher education was historically limited to the country’s elite (wealthy, white men) and since low-income and working-class students typically drop out of the educational system long before graduate school (Smith, Altbach, and Lomotey 2002), it may not occur to some that our graduate school classrooms are no longer exclusively populated with the offspring of the privileged middle and upper-middle classes. Later in the interview, the same student observed that first-generation students in his

master's-level program were not planning to continue for the Ph.D.:

It's like, is this [master's program] the final weedout? Obviously on some levels it is, but why?... It just struck me, why don't a number of us go the extra step? I can't speak for [a fellow graduate student], but I don't know of any of us here that are [going on for a Ph.D.], and it's not that we aren't capable. It's just there's something there that we don't want to go farther.... It's something that I'm starting to wrestle with, too. Why don't you want to do this? Are you afraid of doing this? Or you just don't want to be like those people?

These questions bring to light important issues for the academy to consider. We do not like to talk about class issues in higher education (Borrego 2003; hooks 2000), but clearly we need to examine the impact that class biases have on students and on the career aspirations of first-generation, working-class graduate students in particular. Regardless of this student's answers to his own questions—whether he decided not to pursue a doctoral degree out of fear or distaste for the typical professorial culture—his concerns are serious and illustrate the significant impact of marginalization.

Not every instance of marginalization borders on bigotry and prejudice as in Jason's example. Sometimes traditional academic culture is just at odds with the students' family backgrounds. While my subjects' stories were not identical, the overall tenor was similar. One interviewee objected to the formality of higher education and described an emotional distance that feels uncomfortable or unfamiliar. Cole identified non-first-generation students and professors as having limited worldviews. He felt that "students whose parents have gone to college and professors ... are kind of in this little bubble. They don't understand how the rest of the world, Middle America, works." One participant said that her biggest adjustment related to graduate school was encountering the socio-economic differences within the student population. For example, some graduate students talked about being able to purchase new furniture or mentioned that their parents paid their rent. Reflecting on these differences, Lisa mentioned that she had applied to a graduate program at an Ivy League school. "If I would have gotten into there," she said, "I don't know if I would have made it, because everybody would have been ten times worse. It would have been ... I would have felt *so* different than everybody else."

In response to these differences, some interviewees embraced their

“real world” backgrounds or working-class perspectives and were reluctant to give them up. Christian said,

A part of me doesn't want to become like one of those intellectuals that sits around in a black shirt and condescends to everybody and sees negativity in everything because it's all worthless. Be pervaded by cynicism because you know so much.... I'd like to be able to learn about it and be in control rather than becoming part of the intellectual system, I suppose. Does that make any sense?... I want to get inside, but I don't want to be consumed by them.

This desire to keep the culture of academia at arm's length and to maintain a connection to one's familial, cultural, or socio-economic background is at the crux of the dilemma for first-generation graduate students. As so many of the personal narratives of working-class scholars attest (Borrego 2003; Dews and Law 1995; hooks 2000; Rendón 1992; Rose 1989; Ryan and Sackrey 1984), many first-generation graduate students struggle to find a comfortable balance between identities and cultures. Like Collins (1999), hooks (1984), and Rendón (1996), these students want to exist on the margins by choice and from a position of strength rather than as the result of marginalization.

The experience of being “other” in relationship to academic discourse and the culture of academia is directly related to experiences of marginalization in the classroom. Many of the participants were highly aware of their cultural, political, and socio-economic differences. Christian remarked on the traditional liberalism of liberal arts departments:

Some people are like, “Got to hate President Bush. Got to love Michel Foucault.” This and that, you know, very left, intellectual things, which is fine if they believe that, but I feel, because I'm maybe not all the way over there with them, I might be kind of condescended to or marginalized a little bit, not by the professor necessarily but possibly by some of the other students.

Several times during the interviews, participants who criticized professors or other graduate students for being wholesale proponents of what they viewed as liberal political views backpedaled and suggested that perhaps these individuals knew something they did not. This phenomenon seemed to be partially motivated by social correctness and at times a genuine uncertainty about the value of their own beliefs and experiences.

This struggle with the cultural norms of the academic environment is

exemplified by the linguistic adaptations that some first-generation students of lower socio-economic status or from working-class backgrounds make. Many are self-conscious about language, particularly in the classroom. “I’m quiet a lot of the time,” said John. “For me to be articulate, and for me to sound like I know what I’m talking about, I have to think about things a lot. Get in that mindset.” Another participant, Sarah, echoed this: “I have to be really careful about how I say things, what I say. I’m way more paranoid than anybody else about saying something wrong.” Some subjects in the study described encountering unfamiliar terminology or academic concepts that their non-first-generation peers seemed already to know or understand. Others simply felt out of place. “Sometimes I think I am quiet,” reported John, “because, maybe especially during some conversations, I feel like kind of an alien in academia.” This subject chose the word “alien”—a word that is repeated many times in the literature on the first-generation experience (Chaffee 1992; Rendón 1992; Rose 1989)—without any prior reference to the concept during the interview. John went on to describe the importance of adapting to this alien environment. “You adapt to this special environment where you’re supposed to say things a certain way,” he said. To illustrate his point, John described his admissions interview for a highly competitive graduate program at WWU:

When I was in my interview to get into this program, I thought I made a fatal mistake because I said something about coming from the “real world.” [Academia is] sort of like a strange land. It’s its own creation.... Maybe that’s why I think very carefully, because you don’t want to be the “stupid” person in the classroom, the “uncivilized” person. There’s a certain kind of language you’re supposed to learn. Like I’m using big words today [laughter]. When I say them, it surprises me. Even words like “academia.” I remember I was reading a book, and I read “schism,” and I thought, “How do I know that word?”

Language, and academic discourse in particular, is often the site where differences are highlighted in the classroom; it is also a primary marker of socio-economic class (Linkon 1999; Zweig 2004; Zwerling 1992). “Language is a very good example of how I’ve struggled,” said Trisha.

In the field I’m in [counseling] ... my background and language is *not* a deficit, but in college courses my background and language *is* a

deficit. I have to struggle to find those right, exact-fit words. Where I don't need that in my [lower socio-economic] background, I need that in those college courses.

These particular examples of marginalization based on socio-economic class discrimination, discomfort with the culture of academia, and unfamiliarity with academic discourse were unique to the participants' *graduate-school* experience. Graduate school is designed to provide students with a taste of scholarly life, an introduction to the academic community. Faculty who see clear distinctions between themselves and undergraduates may have less rigid boundaries with graduate students. Indeed, they may perceive graduate students, even in master's programs, as future colleagues. Some may expect that all graduate students are—or should be—comfortable with academic discourse, academic culture, and the habits of a particular socio-economic class. Often, however, these expectations do not match the experiences of first-generation, working-class students.

While master's-degree-granting institutions ostensibly focus on the learning, growth, and development of *all* students, it is often the undergraduate experience that garners most attention. Colleges and universities that want to encourage the persistence of first-generation, working-class students in graduate programs will need to do more than usher undergraduates in the front door. We will need to understand the experiences of these students, provide appropriate and effective services, and help faculty to provide support at the departmental and graduate-school levels. These interventions need to focus on enhancing the strengths of first-generation, working-class graduate students and acknowledging and celebrating the cultural and socio-economic class richness that they bring to the university.

In sharing this research with others, I often hear the refrain, "This is my story!"—accompanied by gratitude, hugs, tears, or a plea to share our story with others. When I asked the students I interviewed what they would take away from our conversation, many of them indicated that this was the first time they had ever consciously examined the issues of first-generation status and social class. One participant said,

I think just talking about it makes me realize just how much this has influenced my life. Whereas before, it was just sort of, "this is who I am." I didn't think that there was anything special about it.... And to think that there are other people out there like me, going through what I'm going through, is a *whole* new perspective.

A future counselor compared it to presenting a client with a diagnosis:

Just making the [observation] that there are people out there that have shared this experience is really different. And, I mean, working in mental health, it's incredible ... when you present a diagnosis to somebody and they go, "Oh, my gosh. That's why I've been this way? My life makes so much more sense now." That's kind of how it feels. This really has had an influence on my life.

In the course of an hour-and-a-half conversation, these students came away saying, "it's not just me." One participant said, "Wow. It is surprising. I guess I've always felt like that was just my life. That's just how it is. I never really thought that there were other people that were going through that, ever. That's *really* interesting."

What I find noteworthy about these first-generation, working-class graduate students is their willingness to "go it alone." Strong familial support and academic preparedness is central to many of their stories, but what their narratives ultimately reveal is an intense desire to persevere in their studies in spite of a lack of understanding from their loved ones and the potential loneliness that can come from being the "first in line." Being the first person to do something implies privilege and opportunity. Being first often is related to being exceptional. Standing at the front of the line involves the responsibility of being an example and role model. It also evokes the excitement—and anxiety—of being first.

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