Pathways to Thriving: First- and Continuing Generation College Student Experiences at Two Elite Universities

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Pathways to Thriving:
First- and Continuing Generation College
Student Experiences at Two Elite Universities

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<u>Dedication</u>

To the participants of this study, both first- and continuing generation.

"We are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep."

— William James

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Abstract

In this longitudinal interview-based study, I explore the self-assessed preparation, academic experiences, and social experiences of one ninety-one first-generation and thirty-five continuing generation (those with at least one parent a college graduate) students attending Harvard College and Georgetown University between the years of 2012-2016. Through random sampling techniques and iterative interviews, I examine the variation and change over time among first-generation students' descriptions of their college going experiences and compare these to their continuing generation peers. I identify points of overlap as well as factors that specifically affect first-generation students' transition into and experiences of college. I argue that a classification of first-generation students attending elite universities as either "privileged" or "disadvantaged" glosses over the nuanced and varied self-assessments of first-generation students themselves. Instead, I propose considering first-generation students' characteristics and college experiences—especially at highly selective universities—as multiplex, accommodating both privilege and disadvantage, and transitional in both nature and outcome. In short, the first-generation classification is essentially a social category defined by its liminality, not by a durable set of characteristics.

Even though the first-generation experience is complex and varied, there are nonetheless policy and programmatic lessons that administrators can draw to support first-generation and all students as they transition into and proceed through college. This dissertation examines the various pathways to thriving as articulated by first-generation students themselves. In terms of academics, these include *academic continuation* and *academic divergence* in a field of study, and *academic turnaround* versus *ongoing academic achievement* among first- and continuing generation students from diverse preparation backgrounds. In terms of social experiences, I explore the tactics of *bulwarking*, *pride work*, and *assimilation* as ways in which first-generation students adopt or eschew the classification as an identity feature in a given social context. Finally, I offer specific policy recommendations to administrators aiming not to see their first-generation students make it through, but to thrive in college and beyond.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Historical Context

Introduction

The fate of first-generation college students has recently become a

pressing concern for higher education scholars, college administrators, and the

American public alike.[1, 2] In the wake of the Great Recession and the Occupy Wall

Street movement's inauguration of the "1%" as a household term for wealth

inequality and the stagnation of vocational opportunity for many of our nation's

young adults, colleges and universities have come under scrutiny for the parts

they play in social mobility, social reproduction, and social transformation.[3] Can

these institutions offer a solution to the growing inequality problem, or are they

complicit in its creation? This avenue of inquiry is vast and varied,[4] but the

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[1] For example, see Kaye (May 17, 2016), Fox (April 28, 2015), Foster (Apr. 19, 2015), Riggs (Jan. 13, 2014), Simmons (Jan. 16, 2014), Greenwald (Nov. 11, 2012); also note the popularity of the *I'm First* (n.d.) campaign and the many institutional resource pages dedicated to providing information and support for low-income and first-generation students (e.g. NACADA, n.d.).

[2] This introduction is partially reproduced from my qualifying paper on the same subject (see Gable, 2014).

[3] For example, see Douthat (May 3, 2014).

[4] Recent scholarly examinations along these lines include Radford's *Top student, top school?* (2013); Armstrong and Hamilton's *Paying for the party* (2013); Hamilton's *Parenting to a degree* (2016); Hoxby and Avery's "The Missing One-Offs" (2013); Hoxby and Turner's "Expanding College Opportunities for High Achieving Low Income Students" (2013); Stuber's *Inside the college gates* (2011); Stuber's "Talk of Class" (2006); Bowen et al.'s *Crossing the finish line* (2009); Mullen's *Degrees of Inequality* (2010); and Soares's *The power of privilege* (2007). As a reminder that this research interest is not new, Armstrong and Hamilton's book is a revisiting of Holland and Eisenhart's classic, *Educated in Romance* (1992). For a comprehensive review of the different ways that education is conceived by social scientists to operate as a "sieve, incubator, temple, or hub," see Stevens, Armstrong, and Arum (2008).

experience of college-going for first-generation college students--those whose

parents did not graduate from college--is fast becoming one of the most salient

topics of research by which scholars may discern whether, how, and to what

extent colleges provide opportunity to qualified strivers regardless of

background.[5]

First-generation college students are commonly defined as the first in their

family to attend a four-year college.[6] By entering college they are engaging in a

vocational path that is potentially distinct from that of their parents. As such,

they are presumed unable to rely on their parents' experiential knowledge and

levels of support that could aid their college-going choices. In this manner, they

are a compelling sub-set of the college student population to explore the

processes and outcomes of socialization entailed in college-going in the

contemporary United States. Are the daily practices entailed in attending college

affected by parents' level of education and experiential knowledge of higher

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[5] Kahlenberg (2010) first used the term "strivers" for low-income and first-generation students seeking opportunity through education. Most of the literature concerning first-generation college students addresses these students' experiences while attending open admissions and less-selective colleges (Pike & Kuh, 2005; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak & Terenzini, 2004; Carnevale & Fry, 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger & Nora, 1996; Inkelas, Daver, Vogt & Brown, 2007; Warburton, Bugarin & Nuñez, 2001). These are important studies, as the majority of first-generation students attend less selective colleges. But there are enormous gains to be made by studying those first-generation students who attend America's most selective colleges, especially regarding colleges' role in fostering social and economic opportunity.

[6] The language of media campaigns and public policy discussions often glosses over a more diverse range of students that are otherwise counted as "first-generation" by admissions offices. While the definition of a "first-generation" college student is often debated (Soria & Gorny, 2012), most universities and foundations abide by Choy's (2001) criterion: *the student with neither parent having attained a bachelors degree.*

education? First-generation students' experiences can offer insight into this question, especially as it relates to the mechanisms of social mobility.

In the context of the United States, a country with an abiding commitment to the equality of opportunity and the tenets of meritocracy, this question is crucial.[7] It alights on what counts as fair in the public narrative.[8] This is particularly so at highly selective institutions that serve as training grounds for future leaders in industry, academia, and public service. For those highly selective institutions that have endowments that enable them to offer need-blind admissions and generous need-based financial aid packages, there is an additional pressure--based on the notion of commonweal--to ensure that they are fair in their admissions selections, inclusive of a wide array of talents, and

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[7] For an excellent recent review of the idea of merit in the U.S. and its relationship to higher education, see Joseph Kett's *Merit: The history of a founding ideal from the American Revolution to the twenty-first century* (2012). See also Lemann (2000) and Menand (2011; 2007).

[8] At the outset of *The Chosen* (2004), the landmark study of selective admissions at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, the sociologist, Jerome Karabel emphasizes a tension between two divergent ideas about what is fair in educational practice: one seeks "equality of opportunity," or essentially a meritocratic system that awards the best prepared students with the best possible education; and another seeks "equality of conditions," or a system that shares educational goods among students with varying levels of academic mastery and diverse academic interests. Karabel's history of selective admissions tells the story of how "equality of opportunity" became the dominant path chosen by the most prestigious colleges and universities in the 20th century, and the social ramifications of that path--some positive and others negative--to ethnic minorities, the urban and rural poor, and women.

participant in the expansion of opportunity for a broader and deeper proportion of the population.[9]

The majority of first-generation college students in the U.S. today attend less selective institutions, and the primary concern for aiding these students is to determine best practices for raising their graduation rates.[10] First-generation students who attend elite colleges and universities graduate at higher rates, but the question remains: are elite universities offering a foundation for first-generation students to thrive, both while they are in college and beyond?[11] Does their attendance at elite institutions truly provide them with opportunities for social mobility?[12] And if so, what does that process look like? And what does it mean to the students themselves?

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

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[9] At Harvard, one site of this current study, this pressure, as well as the sources and outcomes in terms of policies and practices adopted by the Office of Admissions, was first analyzed historically by Jennifer Davis Carey (1995) in her doctoral thesis, *Tradition and transition: Achieving diversity at Harvard and Radcliffe*. See also Keller and Keller (2007).

[10] See DeAngelo et al. (2011).

[11] Charles Deacon, the Dean of Admissions at Georgetown University, first posited the goal of *thriving* (rather than "to and through," or access and completion) as the metric of success for selective institutions seeking to support their first-generation students. For a portrait of one elite' university's initiative to move from access to success for first-generation students, See Tough (2014).

[12] Social mobility here presumes either movement from a low-income to a higher income status, or from a field of work that does not require education to succeed to one where education acts as the gatekeeper to a career.

income students.[13] These efforts include eliminating financial barriers to college-going, as well as sending a message to low-income and first-generation students that they can belong and achieve success at an elite college. Likewise, administrators and dedicated alumni have focused on addressing first-generation student transition to college through a variety of outlets. Among these are first-generation student programs, funds, and alumni mentorship initiatives as well as re-tooled academic advising and training for residential and advising staff. Do these institutional efforts alter the experiential effects of being first in the family to attend college? And if so, how do they accomplish this?

In short, the experiences of first-generation students (many of whom are also low-income) attending highly selective colleges offer insight into the mechanisms of social mobility through educational attainment. But they also provide a test of social reproduction: are certain doors open or closed to first-generation students because of their birth origins or parental influence? Studying the social and vocational pathways that students take after they arrive on campus, and the opportunities afforded them while in college and upon graduation, will help scholars to discern whether and under what conditions

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[13] In recent years, first-generation students attending highly selective colleges have comprised between ten and fifteen percent of their freshman classes (Bombardieri, 2013). That number was likely much higher in the decades between 1945-1975, when U.S. higher education went through a period of expansion (see Wildhagen, 2015).

social reproduction occurs despite institutional efforts to maximize the potential

of social mobility for all students.[14]

Finally, because first-generation college students may have different types

of home lives than their continuing generation peers (students with at least one

parent with a four-year degree), they may bring a host of different values, as well

as social and political commitments, with them to college. Do these values and

commitments aid in the transformation of the landscape on college campuses

themselves? Do first-generation students bring their education out into

communities at different rates or with different motivations than continuing

generation students? These questions underscore the possibility that colleges and

universities might also become sites of social transformation. Students are agents

who act upon colleges, sometimes changing the institutional cultures and

practices of the colleges themselves, while at the same time they are shaped by

the institutional messaging the college inculcates. To what extent does the

condition of being first in the family to attend college affect a student's sense of

the interactional nature--and its potential to effect change--in the relationship

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[14] Recent interrogations of the mechanisms of social reproduction in college include the above mentioned Hamilton (2016), Armstrong and Hamilton (2013), and Stuber (2011). More general studies of social reproduction based on educational attainment, though not college-specific, include: Willis (1981); Lamont (1992); Lareau (2003); Lareau & Weininger (2008); Bowen, Kurzweil, & Tobin (2005); and Khan (2011). Finally, higher education scholars whose work calls into question the automatic nature of social reproduction by focusing on the biographies of individual students (thereby offering portraits of student success) include Light (2001); Bain (2012); and Chambliss and Takacs (2014).

between students, the institutions they call "alma mater," and the places they call "home"?

This Study

In this dissertation, I explore the questions above through the stories and insights of ninety-one first-generation college students and thirty-five of their continuing generation peers at two elite universities. The participants span two undergraduate cohorts at Harvard and Georgetown Universities between 2012-2016. These students, one hundred and twenty-six in all, spoke of their transition to and progress through college, including their highs and lows, challenges and accomplishments, over the course of four years. Interviewed first as sophomores and again as seniors, they explained how they changed over time and, in many instances, took the opportunity to revise earlier assessments of their college experiences. By asking the same battery of questions to both first-generation and continuing generation students, I have been able to draw comparisons and note differences in the reported college-going experiences between the two samples.

It is often assumed that there is a fundamental difference in college going between first- and continuing generation students. Instead of beginning with this assumption, this study was designed to test it, and where appropriate, to clarify what differences do exist and whether they are a differences of degree or kind.

Also, first-generation student identity and experiences tend to be treated as monolithic by higher education researchers (see Wildhagen, 2015), but I suspected that there would be great variation in the extent to which first-generation students self-identified as such, as well as the degree to which they believed their first-generation status impacted their experiences in college. This dissertation set out to explore the variability of the first-generation experience, to chart what conditions led to successful outcomes, and to highlight those that could be targeted for ongoing improvement by university administrators.

It is not inconsequential that these participants attended an elite university. By undergoing the admissions and enrollment process, they have indicated their ability and willingness to compete at very high levels of academic rigor. Many of the participants in this study were valedictorians, salutatorians, and top extracurricular competitors in their high schools. They have indicated their willingness to travel, sometimes great distances, both physically and psychologically from their homes and communities. And by attending an elite university with a significant endowment, they have been afforded opportunities—internships, laboratory research, study abroad, and fellowships—that they might not otherwise secure or that might not be as readily available at less selective colleges.

But there are also perceived risks entailed in enrolling in an elite college. Some first-generation students, especially those from high schools with fewer advanced course offerings, may arrive feeling less prepared than their peers for college. They may worry about their "fit" with the university, or that they may not "catch up" to their better prepared peers. They may feel conflicted about the friends and family they departed, or have trouble balancing the expectations from home and school. They might face financial pressures that their continuing generation peers seem not to, thereby exacerbating the perceived difference between themselves and the "typical" elite college student. This study begins by asking whether any of these issues are raised by the first-generation students in the sample, and if so, how do they articulate their concerns and what solutions do they want to see implemented by their university.

The Context of Harvard & Georgetown

The historical context of the term "first-generation" is another important factor in this study. The term "first-generation" was not widely deployed in higher education research or used as a classification in university recruitment until the early 2000s, a period that coincides with a decline in first-generation college attendance rates from 39% at their peak in the early 1970s to under 15% in the early 2000s (Wildhagen, 2015). The effort to recruit and retain high achieving

first-generation students at elite universities speaks to their desire to provide

opportunities to qualified students regardless of background and their fear that

many qualified students are "under-matching" or not attending college at all

(Bowen, Chingos, & McPherson, 2009).

At Harvard, the active recruitment of first-generation students can be

traced to former university president Lawrence Summers' launch of the Harvard

Financial Aid Initiative (HFAI) in 2004.[15] The HFAI initiative was designed to

support students from low and middle income families who might not otherwise

consider Harvard because they assumed it was financially out of reach. It

simplified the financial aid process by eliminating the student loan requirement

and the parental contribution expectation to families under a set income

threshold. Originally, families with an annual income under $40,000 were

expected to pay nothing toward their children's tuition; that threshold has risen

over the years to its current $65,000 income threshold. Currently, families that

earn between $65,000 and $150,000 are expected to contribute up to 10% of their

household income toward tuition. The intended message from HFAI is simple:

"anyone can afford Harvard" (HFAI, n.d.).

But first-generation students are not necessarily low-income students, and

low-income students are not always the first in their family to graduate from

[15] Three key figures involved in the original development and launch of the HFAI initiative
include Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid William Fitzsimmons, Director of Financial Aid
Sally Donahue, and policy adviser to President Summers Clayton Spencer (see Ireland, 2014).

college. At Harvard, the active recruitment and enrollment of low-income

students involved current students and alumni telling their story of their

Harvard experience. For some, this included a narrative of being first in the

family to attend college. For instance, during the freshman orientation program

known as "Opening Days," one reading assignment included an essay entitled,

"Choosing the Color of My Collar," (Tebaldi, 2010) concerning one first-

generation student's experiences attending Harvard after the implementation of

HFAI. But this author's focus was primarily concerned with social class

differences on campus, not the experience of being first-generation per se.

More open discussion about what it means to be "first-generation" began at

Harvard with the creation of an alumni special interest group (SIG) in 2012 by

first-generation alumnus Kevin Jennings and then a student organization, the

First-Generation Student Union, founded by then Harvard College senior Daniel

Lobo in 2013. Since the inauguration of these two organizations and the

dedicated students and alumni who launched and expanded them, coupled with

the efforts of the university to support and publicly discuss first-generation

experiences and challenges at Harvard, the term "first-generation" has become

more of a fixture in the discussion of diversity and inclusion on campus.

At Georgetown the development of the"first-generation" category also

began in the early 2000s with a fundraising effort to increase financial aid and

replace loans with grant packages for high achieving low-income recruits. Upon the conclusion of a major capital campaign in 2003, the Georgetown Offices of Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid created the 1789 Scholarship and its attendant Georgetown Scholarship Program (GSP). Students who receive the 1789 Scholarship are automatically invited into the GSP, a financial aid and program support office (see *Georgetown Office of Student Financial Services*, n.d.). The GSP was specifically targeted to "first-generation" students, and has evolved considerably since its inception in 2004. It hosts a variety of programs throughout the year, as well as mentorship and leadership opportunities, emergency funds, and other financial resources for its members. The GSP has become an integral part of the larger Georgetown community, standing alongside other well-established programs such as the Community Scholars Program (CSP), a rigorous summer transition program originally dedicated to supporting students from the D.C. Public School system, and the Center for Multicultural Equity and Access (CMEA) which hosts CSP and seeks to increase racial and socio-economic diversity and inclusion on campus.

Harvard and Georgetown are just two among scores of highly selective colleges and universities that have implemented dedicated support systems and programs for first-generation students over the past decade (see *I'm First*, n.d.). Their activities undoubtedly affect how first-generation students experience and

evaluate their time in college. As this study traces first-generation students

attending Harvard and Georgetown, it assumes that their experiences evolve in

part due to the evolution of these and similar programs. It also assumes that

national trends in student affairs and student social networks affect how students

evaluate their experiences on campus according to their understanding of what

transpires among their peers on similar campuses across the U.S. In short,

context matters: both the institutional context at Harvard and Georgetown and

the national context in which "first-generation" is fast becoming a commonly

understood category for college-bound students affect how our participants

interpret their time in college.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. In the next chapter, I provide

a detailed description of the methodology of this study and situate it within a

larger four-university collaborative entitled the First Generation Student Success

Project. In Chapter 3, I compare first- and continuing generation students' self-

reported preparation for college, and explore the reasons first- and continuing

generation students offer for their preparation or lack thereof. In Chapter 4, I

compare first- and continuing generation students' discussion of their academic

experiences, including whether they continued or diverged from academic

pathways begun in high school and the factors that affected their satisfaction

with academic experiences in college. In Chapter 5, I discuss the ways in which first- and continuing generation students describe their social experiences, including thematic similarities and differences in how they evaluate "successes" and "challenges" in terms of social life on campus. In Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I also explore students' change over time and offer suggestions for when and why students may re-evaluate prior assessments of their academic and social experiences in college. I offer policy recommendations for administrators seeking to support first-generation and all students in an era when access, inclusion, and success entails ensuring that a diverse student body thrives at our nation's universities, including its most selective ones. Finally, in Chapter 6, I offer a review of the overall findings and propose future directions in institutional support and student/alumni peer networking. I underscore the variation in the first-generation experience, and the extent, when apparent, of the overlap between first- and continuing generation evaluations of their course of college.

Chapter 2: Research Design and Methods

Why Compare First-Generation and Continuing Generation Students

The term "first-generation" implies that there is a difference, observable or

perceived, to the experiences of being the first in your family to attend college

compared to the experiences of students with at least one parent who has gone to

college. The term "continuing generation" specifically ties college-going to

continuance, an implied familial status quo. By contrast, "first-generation"

implies a change in status quo, an alteration in the behavioral pattern of a family,

a divergent trajectory. Unlike other potential descriptors such as race, ethnicity,

or social class, "first-generation" is a term focused on transition from one

category to another: from a person without the experience of college to one with

the experience of college. It implies a certain conferral of advantage, or at least

experience, from one generation to the next: the offspring of first- generation

students, if they attend college, will automatically be continuing generation

students, presumably destined to experience college-going differently than their

parents.[16]

At elite colleges like Harvard and Georgetown, with legacy attendance

rates hovering close to 15% (Sekhsaria, 2015)[17], assumptions about the

advantages of continuing generation students are sometimes conflated with

images of family wealth, parental influence over the administration, and a sense

of institutional familiarity, of the place belonging to you (see Khan, 2011). While

this image fails to reflect the diversity of family backgrounds among continuing

generation students, it nonetheless establishes a powerful narrative that

continuing generation students know how elite colleges like Harvard and

Georgetown operate while first-generation students, whose rates also approach

15%, arrive without the tools and habits to navigate a labyrinthine social and

academic landscape.

But is there a substantive difference between the academic and social

experiences of first- generation and continuing generation students attending

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[16] Sociologist Tina Wildhagen frames the category of "first-generation" similarly as one of transition, liminality, or a hybrid stance rather than a definitive identity. She critiques the creation of the first-generation classification as one that serves selective institutions' needs more than students' goals. While I do not adopt her institutional critique, her definition overlaps significantly with the one I deploy: "… first generation comes to stand as a hybrid class identity for students who are in the process of gaining upward social mobility, allowing them to continue thinking about themselves in individualistic and autonomous terms while obliquely acknowledging their social class of origin" (2015: 290).

[17] See also Hurwitz (2011) for analysis on legacy admissions preferences—or the probability of legacy students gaining admission to schools like Harvard—which is higher than legacy attendance rates. At Harvard, the probability of gaining admission as a legacy student is closer to 30%.

elite colleges? And if so, what are these differences? Are they differences of degree or kind? Are they confounded with other identity features that become salient during college: the status of being racially minoritized and/or excluded on a predominantly white campus (e.g. Harper, 2015, 2013; Torres & Hernandez, 2007), hailing from a far-flung region or foreign country (e.g. Wu et al., 2015; Tas, 2013), attending a lower resourced high school (Black et al., 2015), experiencing financial challenges or growing up in a different social class than many of one's college peers (e.g. Aries & Seider, 2007; Stuber et al., 2011)? If there are differences, how are they manifested, and how can college administrations create environments that affirm and celebrate those differences to maximize the educational benefits of diversity while also offering support structures when students struggle, feel isolated, or are actively or accidentally excluded by their peers?

A few qualitative studies on the experiences of first-generation students at selective institutions have been conducted, but they have neither been comparative in nature nor random in their sample selection.[18] These studies have analyzed only the stories of first-generation students (and not compared them to students whose parents are college graduates), and they have used non-random selection techniques (primarily snowball sampling or soliciting participants from

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[18] See doctoral dissertations Rondini (2010) and Stephens (2010), and undergraduate thesis LaNasa (2011).

among first-generation advocacy groups). As such, these studies risk both

labeling more general dilemmas of college-going as particular problems of first-

generation students and generalizing to the first-generation population

experiences that may in fact be associated with their sample composition. And

while recent comparative studies of low and high income students attending elite

colleges have been conducted (both between different colleges and among social

groups within colleges), their authors tend to operationalize their participants in

terms of race and socio-economic class rather than in terms of parental

educational attainment, leaving unanswered the question of whether and how

parental experiential knowledge of higher education affects student college-

going.[19]

  While "first-generation" is increasingly a taken for granted term among

scholars and policymakers to identify and tailor support services to a segment of

college-going students, research is scant on what this term actually means to

college students themselves, especially those at highly selective institutions. In

general, do most students who are identified as "first-generation" by selective

offices of admissions self-identify as such? Do they find the term salient as they

evaluate their experiences at an elite college? When they talk about college, does

the condition of being the first member of their family to attend college shape

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[19] Excellent examples of such studies include Soares (2007); Stuber (2006, 2011); Lee & Kramer (2013); Aries (2008); and Aries & Berman (2012).

their narrative? If there is considerable variation in the way that first-generation

college students as a group relate to this designation, then under what conditions

do individual students find "first-generation" to be a meaningful term to frame

their experiences?

Likewise, very little comparative analysis has been conducted regarding

the similarities and differences in how first-generation and continuing generation

college students evaluate their social, academic, and personal experiences in

college.[20] Because most of the qualitative research conducted on first-generation

students is not comparative, current available literature risks attributing

experiences to the first-generation condition that may be more generalizable to

the process of college-going itself. Moreover, comparative analysis can help

researchers determine whether other factors--such as high school preparation--

might serve as more accurate predictors of success for first-generation and

continuing generation students alike. Finally, a close comparison of the ways in

which first-generation and continuing generation students evaluate their

experiences in college will provide researchers and policymakers with a deeper

understanding of how students whose parents have different levels of

educational attainment (and therefore varying capacities to offer specific advice)

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[20] Two notable exceptions include Collier and Morgan (2008), and Jenkins et. al. (2009).

interrelate on campus, and whether the condition of being "first-generation"

affects the kinds of social and pre-professional pathways they follow in college.

Research Context: Site Selection of Harvard and Georgetown

Harvard and Georgetown are the sites of this longitudinal study. These

universities were recruited by Richard J. Light, the organizer of the larger First

Generation College Student Success Project (originally comprised of participants

from Brown, Duke, Georgetown and Harvard) and my dissertation adviser. Light

invited a number of highly selective colleges to participate in a longitudinal

study researching the first-generation student experience at elite colleges, and

finalized a working group of four universities committed to collaborating on this

project. Subsequently, I decided for the purpose of this dissertation to focus on an

analysis of two campuses--Harvard and Georgetown--because they embodied

interesting similarities and differences to test whether different approaches to

supporting first-generation students make a difference in terms of student

satisfaction and self-assessed success. Also, administrators and IRB (Institutional

Review Board) committees from both campuses agreed to allow this work to be

conducted without the requirement of institutional pseudonyms. As I strongly

agree with the social scientists who argue that institutional pseudonyms are

unnecessary and often counter-productive, I was pleased that these two sites

agreed to be named in the analysis.

At Georgetown and Harvard there are many similarities in terms of

student demographics, institutional type and size, the curriculum and

institutional mission, and geographic location (i.e. wealthy neighborhoods

centrally located in metropolitan areas). Likewise, these universities are similar

in their overall costs of attendance. They are expensive universities to attend, and

many of the first-generation students in both universities' samples required

significant or full financial aid, often reporting that financial pressures were an

ongoing challenge.

But there are also differences in available programming on each campus

that may yield important distinctions in terms of how first-generation students

narrate and evaluate their time on campus and their relationship with the

institution. At Georgetown, most first-generation college students are

automatically invited into the Georgetown Scholars Program.[21] This program

began in 2004, first as a scholarship-only initiative but one that quickly morphed

into a holistic support program in line with Georgetown's tenet of *cura personalis,*

or care of the whole person. The GSP, as it is known on campus, offers

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[21] According to Georgetown's Dean of Admissions Charles Deacon, this figure is approximately 90% of all first-generation students enrolled in Georgetown. However, several participants in this study self-disclosed as first-generation but not members of GSP because their parental incomes were high.

workshops, weekly activities, large events throughout the year, drop-in tutoring and social support, as well as funds to alleviate student emergencies such as surprise medical expenses or the cost of an unanticipated trip home. The GSP also directs students to other offices, such as the Student Health Center or Academic Services, and will make appointments for their Scholars when appropriate. At Harvard, no such initiative exists at present, but dispersed throughout the university are efforts to support first-generation students, as well as a new first-generation alumni group dedicated to mentoring current undergraduates and a first-generation tutor in one of the residence houses. Moreover a recently launched student organization, the First-Generation Student Union, seeks to offer and advocate for more robust support both socially and academically for Harvard first-generation students.

In comparing the two universities, I considered the initiatives at Harvard as both dispersed and student-led and those at Georgetown as more centralized and university-administered (although many of the programs emerge from student ideas). Comparing certain aspects of the two universities (while also agglomerating other, more generic, information from both into a larger data set) afforded this project the opportunity to discern whether there are differences in the first-generation student experience based on the different natures and practices of the programs they experience.

Other context-based differences emerged during the course of this study that I did not anticipate and that merit discussion now. At the start of this project, I did not consider Georgetown's Jesuit identity as specifically affecting student perceptions of the university's commitment to or treatment of first-generation students. Very quickly, however, I realized that the Jesuit identity and the mission of the college mattered a great deal to a large proportion of Georgetown's first-generation participants. They repeated the refrain of one of Georgetown's cardinal values, *"women and men for others,"* in their interviews concerning their experiences on campus, and they underscored what they perceived as the difference in their experiences as compared to what they imagined first-generation students experience at other elite universities. This was a source of pride among Georgetown's first-generation students, who thought that they received support unavailable at other elite campuses.

Also, at the launch of this project, there was not a strong student-sponsored fount of first-generation identity or narrative building, or what I would call *pride work,* being conducted among undergraduates at elite universities. Instead, first-generation students appeared more inclined to organize around ethnic, racial, or other identities. But over the course of this project *I'm First,* a nationwide collaborative sharing first-generation stories, and *IvyG,* a student network and annual conference for and by first-generation

students at Ivy and Ivy-like universities, were launched and grew into

substantial resources for first-generation students nationally. Georgetown and

Harvard undergraduates have participated in these and other multi-institution

networks, becoming leaders and public voices in an emerging field. Their

participation in these broader communities in turn affected how they spoke

about their experiences on their home campus. In short, in some ways the sites of

Georgetown and Harvard served as unique contexts, while in other ways these

contexts overlapped considerably, and in yet other ways they resonated with

events and activities on campuses nationwide.

Participant Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited at both Georgetown and

Harvard in multiple phases. First, during AY2012-13 and AY2013-14 the

Undergraduate Office of Admissions at each university generated a random

sample of first-generation and continuing generation sophomores, adjusted with

replacement to approximate the gender and ethnic representation of the

population of first- and continuing generation students at each institution.

Second, a member of the research team at each university sent an

invitation letter via e-mail to all sophomores in the sample explaining the study

and asking the students whether they would be willing to participate in a one-

hour interview concerning their academic and social experiences in college to date. For the first-generation students, both Harvard and Georgetown disclosed that this study was primarily interested in identifying institutional and informal strategies to support first-generation students. For the continuing generation students, Harvard's recruitment letter focused on supporting all students, with no mention of first-generation students in the initial invitation, while Georgetown's recruitment letter specified that the focus of the study concerned first-generation students. Other researchers on the project and I think this different recruitment strategy resulted in a lower yield among Georgetown's continuing generation participants in the first two years of the study.

The first- and continuing generation sophomores who agreed to the initial invitation were then assigned an interviewer who scheduled and completed the one-hour interview somewhere on or near campus. At Harvard, five interviewers completed ninety-three interviews during the first two years of the study. The Harvard interview team comprised a mix of university positions, including Thomas Dingman, the Dean of Freshman; Jasmine Waddell, a Resident Dean of Freshmen; Anya Bassett, Senior Lecturer and the Director of Undergraduate Studies in Social Studies (and co-principal investigator of the project); Richard Light, a professor with a joint appointment at the Harvard Kennedy School and Graduate School of Education (and co-principal investigator); and myself, a

doctoral student at the Graduate School of Education. I served as the primary

interviewer, completing more than 60% of the total interviews each year. At

Georgetown, Jennifer Nguyen, a first-generation Georgetown alumna and

Georgetown graduate student at the time, completed sixty-seven interviews

during the first two years of the study. Nguyen served as the principal

investigator of the Georgetown team during the project's first two years. While at

Harvard the interview team was intentionally eclectic to minimize interviewer

bias or systematic error from power differentials in the interview, at Georgetown

the single interviewer method was deployed to maintain efficiency and

uniformity in the data collection. Compelling rationales for each strategy exist,

but the parties involved at each campus were not convinced that the different

strategies hurt the later data synthesis despite variation in the interview teams

across campuses. Because this study was exploratory and solutions-based rather

than experimental, we were less concerned with replicating exact interview

conditions across the two campuses.

In AY2012-13 and AY2013-14, the data collection and analysis focused

entirely on sophomore student reflections concerning freshman year. The

available data from that stage were cross-sectional in nature, providing the

opportunity to compare across campuses and between first- and continuing

generation students. Each campus compiled an end of year report and delivered

a presentation to a larger group of interested administrators from the four universities involved in the First-Generation Student Success Project. I wrote and delivered the findings from Harvard at these meetings and incorporated the group's feedback into the ongoing analysis. Likewise, Jennifer Nguyen wrote and delivered the findings from Georgetown and incorporated the group's feedback into the ongoing analysis there.

The final phase of recruitment began in AY2014-15 and concluded in AY2015-16. This phase marked the transition of the study from a cross-sectional to a longitudinal research project. At this time, everyone who completed interviews with sophomores was then re-assigned the same students, now seniors, to recruit for a follow-up interview. Each interviewer invited his or her participants via e-mail to a one-hour interview concerning their academic and social experiences in college. Additionally, to make up for a low participant rate among continuing generation students, Georgetown generated a new random sample of continuing generation seniors in AY2014-15 and recruited them with the same invitation format as Harvard's, this time yielding a much higher (~50%) response rate. Because Jennifer Nguyen graduated before the longitudinal phase of this study began, Georgetown hired another doctoral student and first-generation graduate, Christopher England, to complete the Georgetown senior interviews in AY2014-15. When he graduated in 2015, I completed the AY2015-16

interviews and analysis for Georgetown and was given access to all prior interviews and reports for the purpose of synthesizing our overall findings.

Table 1 indicates the number of students invited to participate and those who completed interviews.

Table 1: Georgetown & Harvard Invited and Participating Students, by year								
	2012-13 Invited	**2012-13 Particip.**	**2013-14 Invited**	**2013-14 Particip.**	**2014-15 Invited**	**2014-15 Particip.**	**2015-16 Invited**	**2015-16 Particip.**
Georgetown First Generation	50	28 (56%)	55	33 (60%)	n/a	25	32	30 (94%)
Georgetown Continuing Generation	40	2 (5%)	100	4 (4%)	n/a	28	4	2 (50%)
Harvard First Generation	50	28 (56%)	65	27 (42%)	24*	22 (92%)	28**	22 (79%)
Harvard Continuing Generation	40	18 (45%)	55	20 (36%)	18	16 (89%)	20	17 (85%)

* The original 2012-13 first-generation cohort included students who took extended leaves or left the university between their sophomore and senior year. The lower number of invited seniors reflects this cohort's attrition.
** One first-generation participant from the original 2012-13 cohort (seniors of 2014-15) took a one-year leave of absence and so was incorporated into the following cohort year (seniors of 2015-16).

Table 2 indicates the number of repeat participants at both Georgetown and

Harvard by cohort year ('15, '16).

Table 2: Repeat Participants, by cohort ('15, '16)			
	Cohort 1 ('15)	**Cohort 2 ('16)**	**Total**
Georgetown Repeat FG	17	30	47
Georgetown Repeat CG	0	2	2
Harvard Repeat FG	22	22	44
Harvard Repeat CG	16	17	33
Total	55	71	126

First-Generation and Continuing Generation Participant Demographics

When comparing first-generation and continuing generation students at

Harvard and Georgetown, one immediate question is whether the population

demographics between first-generation and continuing generation students are

similar by such measures as gender, ethnicity, and high school type. Moreover,

do the students who agree to an interview, and thus who shape the sample,

represent the first-generation or continuing generation population at the

university? While every effort was made to recruit a representative sample of

participants,[22] the final sample is ultimately comprised of those who agree to participate.

As shown in *Table 3* below, women, Latino Americans, and African Americans are somewhat overrepresented in the first-generation sample compared to the overall undergraduate population at Georgetown and Harvard.[23] First-generation students in this sample also attended public high schools at a higher rate than their continuing generation peers.[24] Among continuing generation students in the sample, White students are slightly over-represented and Latino Americans are slightly underrepresented compared to the overall undergraduate population at Harvard and Georgetown. These numbers suggest that the first-generation and continuing generation students who chose to participate in this study may not be representative of the overall population of first-generation students at these universities (information that is not publicly available to make the comparison). More likely, however, the

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[22] At each university the Office of Undergraduate Admissions randomly generated the initial list of students to invite in part to maintain the privacy of the first-generation students at each university. From information provided by the Office of Institutional Research at each university, we know that the first-generation sample in this study comprises between 11 - 15% of the first-generation population in each cohort year at each university ('15, '16).

[23] At Harvard, the class of 2015 was 48% White American, 19% Asian American, 10% African American, 10% Hispanic, 2% Native American, 16% Unknown, and 10% International (Source: Harvard Office of Institutional Research, reported in Bridge Feasibility Subcommittee Final Report, September 2015). At Georgetown, the class of 2016 was 59% White American, 13% Asian American, 8% African American, 7% Latino American, 5% Unknown, and 7% International (Source: Georgetown University Office of Undergraduate Admissions website).

[24] Chi Square: 6.688, p<.01

different demographic make-up of the samples could indicate that first-generation students in the sampled years at Harvard and Georgetown comprise a different mix of ethnicities and high school background than the overall population at these schools. Specifically, the modal first-generation student at these universities may be female, Latina, and from a public high school, as this sample indicates. A recent review of quantitative studies of first-generation students indicates that, in the United States, the modal first-generation student is female, Latina, and a public high school graduate (Spiegler, and Bednarek, 2013). Importantly, though, the sample bespeaks considerable variation in ethnic and school backgrounds among both first-generation and continuing generation students at these universities.

Table 3: First-Generation and Continuing Generation Participant Demographics								
		FG (Soph.) n=116		FG (Seniors) n=99		CG (Soph.) n=44		CG (Seniors) n=63
Gender	Female	78	67%	69	70%	23	52%	35	56%
	Male	38	67%	30	30%	21	48%	28	44%
Race	White	34	67%	25	25%	30	68%	36	57%
	Black/ African American	21	67%	12	12%	3	7%	9	14%
	Asian/ Asian American	13	67%	20	20%	9	20%	14	22%
	Latino	39	67%	37	37%	2	5%	2	3%
	Multi-Racial	9	67%	5	5%	0	0%	2	3%
High School	Public	84	67%	77	78%	27	61%	38	60%
	Private	32	67%	22	22%	17	39%	25	40%

Data collection

The primary source of data for this study was the one-hour semi-structured interview, conducted once during students' sophomore year and again during their senior year (see *Appendix B & C*). At Harvard the interview protocol was designed by Richard Light and Anya Bassett, Harvard's co-principal investigators of the "First-Generation Student Success Project," and was written so that the sophomore and senior interviews would be similar enough to allow for analysis across the four years of the study. At Georgetown the protocol

was modeled on the Harvard protocol, with adjustments to accommodate the different institutional settings and the fact that Georgetown operated a comprehensive, designated program for first-generation students, the aforementioned GSP.

To supplement and contextualize these interviews, I also consulted student publications (such as *The Harvard Crimson* and *The Hoya*), public events, and public internet postings relevant to this study and its participants (such as postings from the First Generation Forum, IvyG, and GSProud).

The interviews themselves contained a mixture of open-ended and content specific questions designed to blend student narratives of their experiences on campus with recommendations for improvement or adjustments to campus policies. The questions focused on students' assessments of their own academic and social achievements and challenges, with a focus on how the institution could best support students navigating different spheres of college going—the classroom, the residence hall, the extra-curricular environment. I and the other interviewers involved deployed an interpretivist-constructivist lens to the interview (Schwandt, 1998; Charmaz, 2006; Geertz, 1973), allowing students to craft their own narrative[25] while also providing them the opportunity to act as

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[25] See Baxter Magolda, 2001 regarding the importance of self-authorship in college; see also Ganz, 2009 for more on the importance of crafting one's "story of self." Ganz, a Harvard professor, offers workshops to undergraduate leaders, and several participants mentioned his work in their interviews.

auto-experts and to deliver advice to their university.[26] This interview strategy is

akin to what anthropologist James Beebe (2001) calls "directed conversation,"

and intentionally placed the participant in the position of collaborator in order to

identify relevant student-facing policy solutions.

First-generation and continuing generation students were asked the same

battery of questions during each interview phase, with the exception that first-

generation students were asked how the university could better support its first-

generation students while continuing generation students were asked how the

university could better support all students. Continuing generation students who

asked about the purpose of this study were told that the goal was to find ways to

improve the experiences of first-generation students in particular, and all

students in general. As such, some continuing generation students may have

tailored their responses with that goal in mind, while others responded in more

general terms with ideas to improve the undergraduate experience. First-

generation students who did not consider their first-generation status as relevant

to their college-going experiences were encouraged to explain why they thought

so during the open-ended portions of the interview. Thus, as interviewers we

intended to allow students to craft their own narrative and not embrace any

[26] See Fluehr-Lobban (2008) for a persuasive argument for inviting participants to come up with their own "authentic" solutions to problems they perceive. Like Beebe (2001), Fluehr-Lobban and other "participatory anthropologists" rely on the ethnographic tradition of participant observation, but their insights can easily be applied to the interview context.

specific framework that they might consider false, partial, or constraining. This openness in conceding that the labels we researchers operated under might not be valid to the participants themselves allowed for greater flexibility in interpretation and distinguished this study from prior ones assuming that first-generation students involved would naturally embrace the moniker or the frame of research.[27]

At the onset of the interview, all participants were invited to create their own pseudonym, thus allowing them the opportunity to identify themselves in future analyses and to respond to the researchers' interpretations of their stories in the write-up. This study intends to respect the privacy of its participants while maximizing transparency on the part of the research process. As such, the name of the universities is kept intact and the participants themselves can identify and "speak back" to the ways in which this thesis interprets their narratives.[28]

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[27] Constructivist qualitative researchers commonly point out that interlocutors may not agree to the terms they are identified with by researchers or by the institutions that purport to serve them. Participants may perform complex and even contradictory "identity work" in their interviews by critiquing or offering caveats to their given identity (Jacobsson & Akerstrom, 2013; Juhila, 2004; Kraus, 2000). The interview design for this research was flexible enough to allow for our participants to critique and correct the given identities purported in the interview.

[28] In this way, this thesis models itself of recent longitudinal research on college students such as Aries (2008) and Aries & Berman (2012), who keep the university names intact while allowing students to identify through self-chosen pseudonyms. But it also pays homage to anthropologists such as Ruth Behar, who in *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993) explored the complicated point-counterpoint between the social scientist speaking for her interlocutor and the interlocutor responding back with critique. Behar questions her own narrative authority throughout the process of compiling and then translating someone else's life story. Similarly, this thesis intends to grant narrative authority to its participants while also conducting the work of putting disparate pieces together into a larger analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the interview write-ups themselves. The interviewers at Harvard and Georgetown delivered to me write-ups with direct quotes or, when noted, paraphrases of student responses to interview questions. I considered these write-ups as raw data for the purpose of analysis, but was also aware that transcribed interviews are already in some way digested and interpreted in the process of transcription.[29] Given that the purpose of this research is not to ascertain the most accurate depiction of first-generation college going but to identify themes and trends of similarity and difference between first- and continuing generation students in order to recommend programmatic improvements, I was not overly concerned by the variation in write-up formats.

Once all interviews were delivered, I read each write-up in full twice in order to get a feel for the pacing and general tone of the interview. Interviewers sometimes made notes about the interview itself, and I incorporated these notes into my assessment of the write-up. Once I ascertained a general feel for the overall tone of the interviews as a group, I then compiled all first-generation interviews into one file and created a spreadsheet where I cut, pasted, and

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[29] The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed at Georgetown, but not tape recorded for budgetary reasons at Harvard. At Harvard, interviewers typed student responses on laptops during the time of the interview, or wrote down student responses and later transcribed paraphrased responses. The quotes used for analysis were all verbatim direct transcriptions from typed interviews. Student responses that could not be quoted due to paraphrasing in the write-ups were nonetheless useful in the overall analysis.

reorganized responses from each participant by question. Focusing on each question in turn, I then re-read all the responses, organized these responses by emergent themes, reviewed the themes and recategorized them into general theme groups. I then conducted a hand count and compared the percentage of students whose responses fell into each of the theme groups identified in order to differentiate dominant and minority or secondary themes. I noted any outliers and sought evidence in the interview for why a participant might respond to an interview question in a way that was not encapsulated by the general themes emerging from the overall group. For any questions that involved quantifiable responses, such as satisfaction scales, major selection, or responses to yes/no questions, I created comparative tables to visualize the scope, range, and shape of response types. Next, I repeated this method in full for continuing generation participant write-ups.

Once a basic digestion and component breakdown was conducted for both first- and continuing generation participant responses, I then set out to compare first- and continuing generation responses. I noted points of overlap and divergence, and where I found divergence I tested whether differences were meaningful or slight. For anything that could be tested by a simple 2X2 contingency table—such as questions regarding whether a student felt "more/as" or "less" prepared for college than his/her peers—I conducted a simple

statistical test (the *Fisher's Exact Test* for statistical significance) to determine whether differences in categorical response were significant. Given that this is a small sample study (under 100 participants in each category) yielding primarily qualitative data, I deployed contingency tables specifically to provide another layer of context to the qualitative findings. This simple statistical tool proved useful when comparing across first- and continuing generation responses to discern which responses were more common across the groups and which were primarily associated with one or the other participant group.

At this stage, the analysis was primarily descriptive and interpretive. Its perspective was largely "emic," or shaped by the participants' point of view. Without judging the validity of truth claims offered by participants, it sought to unearth themes in how students themselves interpreted their experiences in college and to compare their responses by first- and continuing generation status. The basic guiding question to shape the analysis included: what are the similarities and differences between how first- and continuing generation students talk about their experiences of college-going at an elite university? The analysis focused on the ways in which students *spoke* about their college going, presuming that their speech in the interview context would correlate to a large extent with what they desired the university to know about their experiences and

how they wished their experiences to shape future practice and policy at the institutional level.

In order to check my initial interpretations for researcher bias, I sought input from the interview team and from interested students, administrators, and alumni at each of the universities. I cross-checked the emergent themes and my interpretation of the interviews with the entire interview team by delivering preliminary analyses at the end of each study year, inviting responses and incorporating changes in the following round of research and analysis. During the years when Georgetown interviewers conducted their own in-house analysis, I also discussed preliminary findings periodically throughout the study year with their team to check for validity and transportability of the findings. And I attended student roundtable discussions and alumni events focused on first-generation student success at Georgetown University, while other members of the research team attended first-generation student focused events at Harvard University. These events provided an opportunity to further contextualize the interview findings. I compared the issues addressed in these roundtable discussions and public events with interview responses as a form of ongoing data triangulation.

Data Reporting

The write-up phase of this project was iterative and cumulative, beginning with the end of year reports delivered to "First Generation Student Success Project" members and discussed at each of its annual meetings. I also analyzed the first two years of this study for my qualifying paper, a requirement of my doctoral degree (see Gable, 2014). Each exercise in synthesizing the findings of this study afforded me with the opportunity to share and receive feedback on the research, as well as to offer direct programmatic advice to the involved institutions. At this point, the analysis evolved from descriptive to prescriptive, as I provided programmatic and policy guidance aimed at administrators and program staff interested in developing and/or improving relevant student support services. Several of these suggestions were incorporated into subsequent programming at Harvard and Georgetown, providing our participants with the experience of having their voices heard and witnessing change of policy during their course in college.[30]

In delivering the findings, I selected quotes from students that were either typical of more common responses in the sample, or were distinctive in some way. I then explained as a framing device how this student's response was either

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[30] I and the other researchers on this project were aware of the possibility that our iterative delivery of findings and subsequent program changes may affect future years' findings. Given that this study was not designed purely to snapshot the experience of first-generation students but to follow the evolution of their experiences on campus, we considered it a risk worth taking.

typical or distinctive. I chose to maximize students' voices by showcasing students' own narratives of their experiences in college while also providing relevant information about each participant whose quotes were used. It was my intention to keep quotes intact whenever possible, allowing each student's response to a question to be read and analyzed in full. While it is more typical for social scientists to provide their readers with shorter, more digested quotes that support their argument, I eschewed this strategy when possible to maximize autonomous conclusions from the reader. This strategy provides the reader with direct access to the participants' tone, style, and message. It also allows the reader to analyze the data I use in the analysis in order to draw separate conclusions if necessary. As such, I invite the reader to be an active participant in the analysis and to judge whether the participants' voices were properly rendered.

Rapport And A Note About My Status As It Relates To This Research

This study could not have been conducted without the trust and willingness of our interview participants, who committed to sharing sometimes painful details about their college experiences not once but twice over their four years in college. The research team was acutely aware of both the importance of this research to its participants and the risk entailed in speaking to us about

uncomfortable elements of their personal stories (e.g. histories of homelessness, undocumented status, family financial issues, dealing with racism or classism once on campus, etc.). Considerable efforts were made during the interviews to build rapport between the interviewers and participants. Examples include polite e-mail notes reminding students of upcoming interviews and thanking them for their ongoing commitment to the project; offers of scheduling at the students' convenience and not the other way around; and gifts of coffee, light meals, and for seniors, a small monetary gift ($10 gift card) as a token of thanks for their time, commitment to the project, and considered responses to requests for advice. During the interviews, each interviewer made an effort to listen deeply, to encourage honest responses without fear of judgment, and to take careful notes and ask follow-up questions in the event of confusion.

However, given that some participants interviewed with senior administrators and others interviewed with graduate students, it is possible that participant responses differed by interviewer type. For instance, some social scientists suggest that interview participants are more inclined to speak frankly about their challenges when they perceive the interviewer to be close in age, to have had similar experiences, or to share a connection based on ethnicity or

social class.[31] The range of interviewers meant that the participants might not feel

a connection with their interviewers based on age or social status, and so the

interviewers made an effort to build rapport through other means such as

attentive listening and an emphasis on collaboration in the interview. In order to

discern whether the interviews were skewed by any perceived power

differentials between the participant and interviewer, I compared the interview

write-ups by interviewer type and found no significant differences between

interviews conducted by administrators and those conducted by graduate

students, and likewise no significant differences between interviews conducted

by interviewers who were first-generation alumni and those who were

continuing generation alumni. The resulting similarity in the range of interview

responses may be the result of extensive rapport building in the interview

context, or it may be because the stated purpose of this project—to identify ways

to best support first-generation and all college students at elite universities—is an

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[31] Recent qualitative research into first-generation and low-income student experiences in college often begins with the researcher positioning him- or herself as a member of the group and arguing that his or her findings are perhaps more robust or valid than they could otherwise be if an outsider conducted the research (examples include Rondini, 2010; Stuber, 2011; Jack, 2014, 2015; see Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013 for this strategy as a reporting trope particular to first-generation research). This methodological stance touches on a long-standing methodological debate about insider/outsider status when conducting qualitative research. See Merriam et al., 2001; Dwyer & Buckle, 2015; Gair, 2011; and Chavez, 2008 for a few excellent examples of the the complicated negotiations between insiders and outsiders in interview research. My position is that there are advantages and disadvantages to both statuses, and that team research incorporating both insiders and outsiders is optimal whenever possible.

issue that our participants care deeply about and are willing to discuss regardless of the position the interviewer embodies at the university.

Given the increasing concern regarding whether researchers have the authority to speak for their research subjects, particularly when those research subjects are minoritized or marginalized in some way and the researcher is an outsider to the group, it should be noted that as a college student I was neither first-generation nor a student at an elite university. I am an "outsider" to both statuses. I came to this research because I am deeply invested in increasing access to and success in quality postsecondary education for all students and for marginalized and minoritized students in particular. I am also convinced that ground-up longitudinal research seeking student input in how to improve the college going experience provides necessary nuance to other forms of research on student outcomes (e.g., survey data or quantitative analysis of standardized test scores). I believe that I was able to convey how much I care about this research to

the participants involved, and I was careful to disclose that as as college student I was neither an "elite" student nor "first-generation."[32]

This self-disclosure often worked to my advantage, because as an outsider my interview participants were clear to underscore issues or spell out concerns that they thought I might not otherwise understand. For instance, when students would try to assess my positionality by asking, "Did you attend the College?" (meaning was I a Harvard alumna) or "Where did you go to college?" (meaning did I also attend an elite college), I would respond with, "No, so you will have to explain a little more to me than you otherwise would," or "I attended a non-elite college, so I may not have had similar experiences to yours; you will have to explain yours to me." This approach appeared to work well. Interview participants often thanked their interviewer for the opportunity to share their stories and reflect on their experiences. In turn, I and the other interviewers involved were cognizant to thank both first-generation and

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[32] I and the other interviewers could, however, make connections with our participants in other ways. For example, for Southern students, I often disclosed that I was born and raised in the Deep South, attending public and magnet schools in a lower-resourced school district for my entire K-12 experience. When asked, I would share that my parents were both first-generation, and that they grew up in low-income households with parents who struggled to find work or who, as single parents, scrambled to pay the bills. When asked whether I understood what it was like to experience the pressure of attending an elite college, I would respond that I both witnessed and experienced this pressure first-hand as a graduate student and teaching assistant at two elite universities. Other interviewers could draw similar connections, such as being first-generation at the same university, or being a minority college student at a predominantly white institution, or PWI. But it should also be noted that people from very different backgrounds care about improving the experience of first-generation and all students; several members of this research project were "legacies" who desire a more accessible, inclusive university in their alma mater.

continuing generation participants for their time and insights. It may have

helped participants to know that several of the interviewers involved were first-

generation alumni, but this is not a conclusion that can be drawn from the

available data.

Chapter 3: On Preparation

Introduction

Here is a simple truth: a student's sense of preparation for college is an important, but not a necessary, first step in achieving success in college. At elite universities, high performing students from a wide variety of backgrounds and educational experiences are brought together in dormitories and classrooms and quickly begin to compare their preparation levels and prior achievements. As education critics like Richard Kahlenberg (2010) point out, aspiring students from lower-resourced backgrounds or with less familiarity with college-going may judge themselves against those who have been afforded more educational opportunities and structural supports. Elite universities have a strong moral and practical interest in attracting students from diverse backgrounds, including first-generation students (HFAI, n.d.). But little research has been conducted on the way that first-generations students talk about their preparation for college in comparison with their continuing generation peers. Do first-generation students narrate their preparation differently than students with at least one parent graduate? And if so, what lessons can administrators and policymakers draw from their insights?

In this chapter I explore the responses of first-generation students to a series of interview questions regarding their preparation for college. I compare these responses across a range of first-generation students, underscoring the diversity within the first-generation sample as well as between first- and continuing generation students. I argue that a binary approach to identifying first-generation students--one that separates "privileged" from "disadvantaged"—is less accurate or useful than one that incorporates a diversity of personal narratives of achievement and aspiration (Jack, 2014, 2015). Finally, I suggest that supporting first-generation and all students as they enter college requires a number of ways (informal and formal) to encourage success among all students, as well as framing notions of privilege and disadvantage as shifting categories largely dependent on context, personal motivation, and the practice of regularly seeking help from others. I explore these ideas through the narrative responses of individual first-generation students, not because their experiences are representative of all first-generation students (indeed, my point is to emphasize variation within this group) but because their stories highlight the processes by which first-generation students seek and find success through challenging circumstances on elite campuses.

Salvi's Story

I first interviewed Salvi in the late fall of his sophomore year. We met in a tiny cafe just off campus one evening between his classes and a study session with friends. As he stepped through the basement door of the cramped cafe, I was immediately drawn to his dimpled grin, his close-cropped hair, and the oversized t-shirt and parka dwarfing his smallish frame. His apparent sartorial sensibility seemed to me distinctive from the typical uniform on campus this time of year.[33] He appeared to recognize me immediately despite its being our first interview (perhaps the laptop on the table gave me away). Without hesitating, Salvi jaunted to the table for a quick lean-in hug and kisses for each cheek. As he sat down ready to tell me about his experiences in college so far, I found myself charmed and surprised by his warmth and enthusiasm given that this was our first encounter.

When I asked him about how he remembered his transition to college, Salvi was eager to differentiate his home and his new surroundings. He told me about the exhausting road trip to college with his parents from the sprawling southern city where he was raised to the manicured quadrangles and hundred

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[33] In recent years, increasing numbers of journalistic accounts like "What Is It Like To Be Poor at an Ivy League School?" (2015) have reported on how differential clothing styles on campus operate as class markers separating high and full financial aid recipients from low- and no-aid students, indicating that sartorial distinction remains active despite a near universal casual dress norm among students (Clemente, 2014; Khan, 2011; Chase, 2008).

year old residence hall he was assigned to inhabit. He talked about leaving his home community a "mini celebrity," eager to begin the adventure of college but apprehensive about what he might discover. He explained how difficult it was to acclimate to the distinctive college architecture, its arresting interior decor, and the crisp landscapes of the campus--physical features he associated with money and power. Salvi had never before seen buildings like those flanking the various precincts of his college, and now he was expected to live and learn in them. Salvi, a Latino American from the U.S. South who grew up in a predominantly minority and low-income community, was neither used to nor prepared for the seemingly taken-for-granted wealth of his newly adoptive home and peers.

Salvi told me about his disappointment with the pre-orientation program called "Dorm Crew," a program that allows students to work cleaning the buildings and grounds of campus in preparation for the new semester: "Why did I sign up for this? Why did I want to scrub toilets before the first week of school? I liked parts of it and made friends, but none of that was lasting. So all I got out of it was $400." He, like some other first-generation students in the sample, had not anticipated how he might feel about Dorm Crew when he enrolled in it -- that it might symbolize for him a kind of servitude to the college or to his fellow students who did not need to work for extra cash. Other students in our sample, first-generation and continuing generation, enjoyed Dorm Crew and appreciated

making money before the onset of the new semester. Some continuing generation students interpreted the manual labor experience as an opportunity to "stay grounded" or "be real" in a context that otherwise catered to their daily needs.[34] But for Salvi and some others, it set a tone of distinction between himself, a financial aid recipient, and those students whose parents could afford +$60,000 in tuition and fees.

In general, though, Salvi's description of the first few weeks of school could be distilled to a narrative of learning to navigate an unfamiliar territory, forging new friendships, and seeking mentors without the benefit of adequate prior knowledge but with optimism and a can-do attitude. He spoke of making friends with upperclassmen during the accepted students visitation weekend, and of continuing to find friends and mentors during the first few months of college through extracurriculars and his residence hall. His classes often challenged him beyond his expectations, and the frigid temperatures were an additional adjustment. But summing up his first few months on campus, he underscored that "I had my ups and downs," but, "If you look back at it, it's in tune with what I said: it's the people. It's all about growth, you know, growing as a person. And I grew." From my vantage point, Salvi was the picture of 'grit,' an old term recently popularized in the educational context by the psychologist

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[34] For instance, continuing generation student Lawrence described his participation in the same program as such: "I did the fall clean-up, made money, and met down to earth kids who are willing to clean toilets for a week. It was great."

Angela Duckworth (2016) and journalist Paul Tough (2013). He appeared to have

an attitude of resolve and fortitude that could get him through difficult

challenges. But what about his actual preparation for college? Did he have the

skills and habits to succeed in the way he did in order to gain admission in the

first place?

When I asked Salvi how well he felt his high school prepared him for

college, his face grew stern and he said that he was "extremely less prepared":

> I came from a public school that was minority dominated and
> predominately low income. People selling drugs on campus, police at
> school, metal detectors to get into school: that was what my school was
> like. I am trying to paint you a picture here, because on the one hand it
> was the best school in the district, but what does it mean to be the best
> school in a failing district with a population like that?
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> We had a few AP classes offered at my school and I am very grateful to
> those classes because they pushed me to think differently. In the non-
> AP classes, the teachers didn't care about teaching as much. It's a
> cyclical problem: the teachers don't respect the students and have low
> expectations for them, and the students respond by not working. And
> the teachers feel like they are legitimated in not wasting the effort on
> the kids because they wouldn't do the work anyway. That cycle of
> apathy, you know? So, lucky me, I was "smart" at a young age, so I
> was put in more challenging classes. And that led me down a different
> path. But there are plenty of kids who didn't have that experience, and
> they could have been provided with so much better than what they
> got. And it's a very bittersweet thing for me because I escaped it but I
> know so many kids who didn't.

Salvi focused on how little he was challenged in high school, not just to explain

his own difficult transition to college, but to make a judgement about the failures

of his public school district and the loss of opportunity for peers who may have

been similar to him but were not as "lucky" as he was. Explaining why he was recommended a remedial expository writing course the first semester in college, Salvi excused his high school instructor while laying the blame on his fellow classmates: "I had a great [English] teacher but she was limited by the students. How are you going to discuss a book assignment when no one else but you and the teacher did the reading? How are you going to teach anything when none of the homework is getting done to prepare for the lesson?" When asked to specifically talk about his writing preparation, Salvi continued to absolve his high school instructor and blame the system for his lack of adequate skills:

> My English teacher was great but she couldn't spend the time challenging me, like I said. And that hits you *bam* smack dab in the face, that you're already inadequate. Afterwards I really appreciated it [taking the additional college writing course], because I am a better writer now. But that hits all sorts of insecurities right away, and I had to deal with those on top of the everyday adjustments. And that rubs off on you. If a crap-load of kids aren't reading, then yeah you're reading more than them but what does that mean?

While his teachers saw him as "smart" and encouraged him to excel, and while he was rewarded for his hard work in high school with accolades and awards, and while his mother encouraged and assisted in his academic striving, the ecology of the school did not prepare Salvi for what was expected of him at Harvard.

Self-Reported Preparation

Salvi's description of his high school experience limiting his preparation for college was not unique in the sample. Among the 126 students who interviewed with us both as sophomores and as seniors, 44% (n=40) of first-generation sophomores described themselves as "less academically prepared" than their peers entering college. By contrast, 20% (n=7) of continuing generation sophomores in the sample described themselves as less prepared for college (see *Table 4*). The difference in self-reported preparation between first-generation and continuing generation sophomores is statistically significant.[35] When interviewed again as seniors, the preparation gap only widens: 57% of first-generation seniors in the sample stated they felt less prepared coming into college, compared to 20% of continuing generation seniors. Again, the difference is statistically significant. I will return to this trend, along with a follow-up on Salvi, at the end of this chapter.

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[35] All statistical calculations in this chapter use Fisher's Exact Test, a 2 X 2 contingency table that can accommodate small sample sizes. Fisher's Exact Test can determine whether a difference between two categorical variables and their outcomes is significant. It determines whether a correlation is significant but cannot determine causal relationships. In order to conduct this calculation, I collapsed all students who stated that they felt "as" or "more" prepared into the same category, assuming that those students were more similar than those who stated they felt "less" prepared for college. I will qualify this method later in the chapter when I ask whether the observations we make are better considered "categorical" or along a continuum, but to start I assume that the data are categorical when comparing first-generation and continuing generation students' responses about preparation. The Fisher's Exact Test indicated that the difference in the proportion of first-generation students reporting feeling less prepared for college compared to the proportion of continuing generation students reporting as such is statistically significant: x^2 (w/ Yates Correction) = 5.221, p<.05

Table 4: Self-Reported Preparation, First-Generation & Continuing Generation				
	More/As (Sophomores)	**Less (Sophomores)**	**More/As (Seniors)**	**Less (Seniors)**
First Generation (FG)	56% (51)	44% (40)	43% (39)	57% (52)
Continuing Gen (CG)	80% (28)	20% (7)	80% (28)	20% (7)

When disaggregating students' responses by high school type, gender, and ethnicity, other differences in self-reported preparation also emerge (see *Table 5* below).[36] For instance, comparing first-generation sophomores who attended public and private high schools, 46% of public school graduates and 35% of private school graduates reported feeling overall less well prepared for college than their peers. When asked the same question as seniors, 62% of first-generation public school graduates and 40% of private school graduates reported feeling overall less well prepared. Attending a private school may have prepared some first-generation students for the expectations of college, given that the percentage of those who report feeling less well prepared is lower for private high school graduates than public high school graduates. However, this difference is not statistically significant.

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[36] I also disaggregated the responses by university (Georgetown & Harvard), and interviewer type (graduate student, faculty, administrator). I did this to insure against accidental bias based on faulty methods such as dissimilar site selections or interviewer-subject bias. The differences in response by university and interview type were negligible and not statistically significant, indicating that site incompatibility and interviewer bias were minimized.

For continuing generation students, no private school graduates in the sample felt less well prepared while 30% of the public school graduates did.[37] A distinct minority of continuing generation students who attended lower resourced high schools narrated their transition to college similarly than did the first-generation students who attended similar types of high school. One continuing generation student, Cassidy, even reported feeling like a first-generation student in all respects but the name. She and other continuing generation students who came from lower-income backgrounds and/or lower resourced high schools described their experiences as more similar to how they imagined first-generation students from like backgrounds might. This finding suggests that, under certain conditions, high school type may matter more than first-generation status when students reflect on their preparation for college.

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[37] While these differences may concern administrators who wish to establish support programs for incoming freshmen based on high school preparation, it is important to note that, in this sample, the difference in response based on high school type is *not* statistically significant.

Table 5: Self Reported Preparation				
	More/As (Sophomores)	**Less (Sophomores)**	**More/As (Seniors)**	**Less (Seniors)**
First Generation (FG)	56% (51)	44% (40)	43% (39)	57% (52)
Continuing Gen. (CG)	80% (28)	20% (7)	80% (28)	20% (7)
High School				
FG Public H.S.	54% (38)	46% (33)	38% (27)	62% (44)
FG Private H.S.	65% (13)	35% (7)	60% (12)	40% (8)
CG Public H.S.	70% (16)	30% (7)	70% (16)	30% (7)
CG Private H.S.	100% (12)	0% (0)	100% (12)	0% (0)
Gender				
FG Female	52% (33)	48% (30)	40% (25)	60% (38)
FG Male	64% (18)	36% (10)	50% (14)	50% (14)
CG Female	71% (12)	29% (5)	82% (14)	18% (3)
CG Male	89% (16)	11% (2)	78% (14)	22% (4)
Race/Ethnicity				
FG African American	36% (4)	64% (7)	36% (4)	64% (7)
FG Asian	63% (12)	37% (7)	53% (10)	47% (9)
FG Latinx	47% (15)	53% (17)	28% (9)	72% (23)
FG Multiracial	40% (2)	60% (3)	40% (2)	60% (3)
FG White	75% (18)	25% (6)	58% (14)	42% (10)
CG African American	100% (3)	0% (0)	100% (3)	0% (0)
CG Asian	75% (6)	25% (2)	87.5% (7)	12.5% (1)
CG Latinx	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
CG Multiracial	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
CG White	79% (19)	21% (5)	75% (18)	25% (6)

Differences emerged in response to questions about preparation based on participants' gender and ethnicity as well. First-generation women were more likely to say that they felt less prepared overall for college than first-generation men.[38] First-generation underrepresented minorities were also more likely to say they felt less prepared for college than first-generation white and Asian/Asian-American students.[39] However, these differences are not statistically significant, and given the small sample size it is far more useful to interpret student response concerning preparation by focusing on what they said in the interview rather than making causal statements based on demographics.

As Steele (2010) and others (Inzlicht and Schmader, 2011; Banaji and Greenwald, 2013) have long pointed out, stereotype threat can affect self-assessment and performance for both women and under-represented minorities, and that effect is more significantly felt at elite universities than non-elite ones. So the fact of a difference in student response based on high school type, gender,

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[38] As sophomores, 48% of first-generation women reported feeling less prepared for college, while only 36% of first-generation men reported similarly. As seniors, 60% of first-generation women reported feeling less prepared for college, and 50% of first-generation men reported similarly. Among continuing generation sophomores, 29% of women and 11% of men reported feeling less prepared. Continuing generation seniors were close to gender parity when reporting preparation levels. These differences are *not* statistically significant.

[39] In general, the differences between white and non-white participant responses are *not* statistically significant, both among and between first-generation and continuing generation students. Using Fisher's Exact Test, the only significant difference occurs when comparing first-generation white and Latinx students: x^2 (w/ Yates Correction)=3.99, p<.05.

and ethnicity may be the result of perceived lack of fit or response to stereotype threat rather than actual performance or observable objective preparation levels.

For Those Less Prepared

Beyond noting that there were differences among student responses to the preparation question based on demographics, what did students actually say about their levels of preparation? For the moment, let us focus on those students who felt less prepared for college. Among those students who stated that they were less prepared than their peers for college, what were some of the reasons they offered for the self-described discrepancy? Most first-generation students, like Salvi, pointed specifically to less competitive peers in high school as a primary reason, with well-meaning but over-worked and/or under-resourced teachers and poor funding as secondary reasons. When they identified a subject area where they felt well prepared, they attributed their ongoing success to a talented and/or dedicated high school teacher who made an effort to challenge them beyond the minimum course requirements. For instance, Salvi attributed his success in math in college to the dedication of his high school calculus teacher. He also credited his mother, who reminded him of upcoming assignments and helped him to stay on top of his work in high school. In short, the blame for lack of preparation tended to lie either in less academically inclined

peers or a flagging system, what might be considered the school-level ecology

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979). But the credit for their preparation came from specific

individuals such as teachers and parents, indicating a potential tension and

interplay among individuals and their educational context.

As noted above, some continuing generation students reported feeling less

well prepared for college in ways that were similar to their first-generation peers.

One in five continuing generation sophomores--and 30% of the continuing

generation sophomores who attended public high schools--stated that they felt

less well prepared than their peers for college.[40] The reasons they often gave for

their felt lack of preparation echoed the first-generation students in this sample:

an under-resourced school, inexperienced teachers with high staff attrition, or the

loss of important pre-college courses. Several students discussed not having a

math option available to them because of the precipitous firing or resignation of a

key instructor, or the loss of course funding from district budget cuts, or even

teacher strikes and walk-outs disrupting school. For instance, continuing

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[40] While more continuing generation women than men claimed to feel less prepared for college, the difference is not statistically significant. Unlike with first-generation students, ethnicity did not seem to be a factor in self-reported preparation for continuing generation students in this sample. Indeed, White and Asian/Asian American continuing generation students were more likely to say they felt less well prepared for college than African American students, and no Latinx continuing generation students completed two interviews to be included in this study (although there were Latinx in both sophomore and senior continuing generation samples, they were non-repeating participants). So the hypothesis about stereotype threat does not appear to be as well supported among continuing generation students as it does for first-generation students.

generation student Donald, a white engineering major from a small town in the

American West said,

> I was less prepared. My academic background was the reason for
> that…I attended a small school with limited resources and I took their
> highest math course my junior year so had a year off math my senior
> year, which was not a good thing at all. Just in general not having
> access to academically rigorous courses, that has been the biggest
> adjustment.

Other continuing students from small towns or larger inner city schools who felt

less prepared for college said that they "didn't know how to study." They also

argued that their high school peers did not have the same level of expectations

for college. Both statements resonated with first-generation descriptions of how

their home communities did not prepare them for the rigors of an elite college.[41]

Preparation Levels a Surprise or Not?

While first-generation and continuing generation students who claim as

sophomores that they were less well prepared for college upon matriculation

may provide similar reasons for their lack of preparation and may come from

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[41] One subtle geographic difference may be of interest: the continuing generation students who
claimed to feel less prepared for college tended to hail from rural, semi-rural, or inner city public
schools, as opposed to the private and wealthy suburban public high schools of their fellow
continuing generation students in the sample. But first-generation students in the sample who
claimed to feel less prepared also often came from inner city high schools (both public and
private, such as the Cristo Rey schools) as well as the flagging inner suburbs that ring
metropolitan regions across the nation, *not* rural regions, and *not* in stark contrast to their first-
generation peers who claimed to feel as or more prepared for college (these too tended to
graduate from similar types of high schools from similar regions, although a higher rate of as/
more prepared first-generation students also attended private schools).

similar kinds of high schools, one key distinction in their self-perception may be important for administrators seeking to launch and improve support programs for their incoming freshmen. First-generation students in the sample who stated they felt less prepared than their peers also were more likely to be *surprised* by this realization only after they matriculated into college. Continuing generation students who stated they felt less prepared, by contrast, came into college aware of the differences in preparation levels based on high school attendance and were primed to feel less prepared than their peers. Their sense of self as it related to their preparation was not shaken by the first few months of college in the same way that first-generation students discussed. They knew they had an uphill climb to make and were mentally more likely to be resolved to this task. For example, MacNeill, a continuing generation white public school graduate from a large urban district characterized his preparation as such:

> Less academically prepared. My high school experience was not rigorous at all...I feel like I was well-prepared intellectually, but not in the concrete sense of classes, assignments, etcetera. I think that is because in my high school not much work was required to get ahead or to stay ahead. At Harvard it is very different. I of course thought and continue to believe that I am just as smart as others in school, but I had a difficult time motivating myself to go to class and complete my assignments on time. It was a different level of rigor and a schedule that was different. I could not write a 5-page paper in an hour and a half like I could in high school. *Those are all a degree of transition that you know in advance but you still can't prepare yourself for as a high school senior in the kind of setting I came from* (emphasis added).

By contrast, first-generation students in this sample who talked of being poorly prepared framed it as a discovery, often in connection with feeling like an extraordinary success in high school and being surprised to deal with failure in college.

The surprise--*Wait, I'm not as prepared as I thought I was?*--is a common theme in the first-generation literature (Stephens et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2014; Stuber, 2011; Capo Crucet, 2015), and is supported in this study. The distinction between continuing generation students coming in less prepared and aware of their lack of preparation while first-generation students felt surprised, sometimes even outraged at their high schools in retrospect,[42] is a fine but important one. It suggests that differentiated and ongoing messaging to incoming students will help those students who "don't know what they don't know"[43] to acclimate to college more swiftly while also not patronizing or fueling the anxiety of those entering college acutely aware of their relative lack of preparation.

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[42] Though by no means universal, this sense of outrage may be performed in the interview as a way of underscoring the uphill battle some first-generation students perceived as their first semester in college.

[43] This point was also raised by Sue Brown, Associate Director of Advising Programs and Assistant Dean of Harvard College, in an informational interview (November 10, 2015). She directed a feasibility study concerning whether the college should implement a dedicated pre-orientation program for select first-generation and/or low-income freshmen.

For Those As/More Prepared

Research studies concerning first-generation college students tend to focus on the challenges that these students face when transitioning into and proceeding through college (Spiegler and Bednarek, 2013). While this is an important focus of scholarship and serves administrators and policymakers well when considering support programs to implement or augment, it nonetheless may skew the story toward a deficit narrative rather than evoking the complex reality of college going in general (see Horowitz, 1987; Hu, Katherine, & Kuh, 2011) and first-generation college-going in particular. It may also turn a condition--first-generation--into a categorical feature when it may in fact be one of intensity, a continuum. To understand more about the complexities of the first-generation college going experience, let us take a look at those first-generation students who said they had no problems transitioning to college and who felt as or more prepared than their peers coming in. Are these students common or rare in the sample? What can their stories tell us about the first-generation experience more generally? And what is their advice to administrators and policymakers seeking to craft programs in support of first-generation and all students?

Jason's Story

I met Jason, a white West Coast senior, one weekday evening in the early

fall of his senior year at a trendy basement pub a short walk from his campus.

Though it was his second interview, it was our first encounter as I had not been

his original interviewer sophomore year. Nonetheless, he approached me directly

where I stood waiting for him at the hostess booth and swung out his hand for a

rigorous handshake and a winning smile. As with Salvi, my first impression of

him was one of confidence and poise limned with an eagerness to tell his story.

After we found our table and placed an order, I began the official

interview by asking him how well he thought his high school prepared him for

college. Jason launched into a description as vivid as but quite distinct from

Salvi's:

> My high school prepared me incredibly well for college. Because I
> grew up in the right area, I had extraordinary resources available...My
> school was one of the top three high schools in [my home state]. It was
> public, but not really. There were some kids from disadvantaged
> neighborhoods there, so it was relatively normal. But it also had one of
> the best music programs in the country. I was a bassist in the orchestra.
> We performed at an incredibly high level. If you didn't see who was
> playing you might think you were at a professional concert. I was
> around the right kind of students, parents who were in the right
> professions, a lot of money. I had more advantages than some of the
> much better off students here who went to lesser schools. The quality
> of my high school teachers was super high. My Model UN group was
> ranked #1 in the country. And that led me to an interest in
> international politics, which brought me to Georgetown. So yes, more

prepared, I had a much easier transition to college. I had great writing skills, math skills, the works.

Jason continued his story by explaining to me how he achieved a 4.0 in his freshman year and retained a 3.9 throughout his time in college. He conducted his own research, was a co-author of a publication, and was actively pursuing further research and publication opportunities. He also joined competitive extracurriculars and maintained a wide social circle. He even kept several jobs off-campus, one in which he served as the personal assistant to a wealthy businessman. Certainly there were difficult times, he explained, like when he went through a distressing break-up or struggled to understand the material for a particular class. But overall, Jason felt more prepared than his peers coming in and this preparation carried him through his college experience. Did Jason have advice for other first-generation students? Like Salvi, he told me that it was the people he met who made all the difference:

> In high school I didn't need help. Subjects came easily and naturally. I could cram the night before a bio test and come in on three hours of sleep and do well. But when I got to Georgetown I began to spend more time studying with friends who were smarter than me or better than me at certain subjects. I made sure that I was surrounding myself with people who were generally smarter than me. It was a tactical change. It is also broadly useful: you want to be surrounded by people who are smarter than you because that's how you learn a lot more.

Jason explained his advice to other first-generation peers seeking to find both academic and social success in college:

> I do think that first-generation students should know this: they should surround themselves with people who are smarter and better than them because that would make them better. First-generation and low-income students tend to self-segregate. I'm friends with plenty of people who could very well be trust fund babies, and they all don't really care if your family doesn't come from money. They might sometimes be oblivious, but most of my friends are generally very conscious of that kind of thing. Generally people from higher income families do not discriminate against people from lower income backgrounds. So generally telling first-generation students to break out of their social circle and hang out with people who are smarter than them would be better off…

Jason qualified his remarks, stating that he did not intend to conflate "smarter" with "wealthier." Rather, if first-generation students elect to form friendships only with other first-generation students, they may find that they are foregoing friendships with students from different backgrounds who also have different capabilities and connections to future professional advancement.

Jason's comments were not unique among first-generation students across Harvard and Georgetown who stated they felt as or more prepared for college. As sophomores, more than half, or 56%, of the first-generation sample stated that they felt as or more prepared coming in. While that number decreased to 43% when they were asked again as seniors, it nonetheless indicates that there is much to be learned about first-generation students who arrive primed to succeed. How did they describe their transition to college? What can their perspectives offer to first-generation students who may enter college feeling less prepared?

Most of the students who stated they were well prepared for college credited first and foremost their high schools and the school system in which they were embedded. Public high school graduates spoke of community investment to augment the minimum offerings at their schools, of dedicated teaching staff and multiple advanced academic and extracurricular opportunities. They also often, though not always, highlighted high performing peers and near-peers whose aspirations for college encouraged them to aim higher than they originally considered.[44] Many of these first-generation students attended well resourced public, magnet, and private schools in their home towns, and stories of family sacrifice either to move or to afford tuition dovetailed narratives of academic success. Some first-generation students in this sample spoke of feeling similar in most respects to their continuing generation peers. As Henry, the son of a graphic designer and a general contractor from a coastal New England town, put it:

> There were never situations where I felt like I was at a disadvantage. There were kids whose parents were professors and they were further along in their intellectual development just because of the nature of how they grew up. My impression is that [this college] is eager to take care of all of us as long as we're willing to reach out to them. So I felt like I was never at a serious disadvantage even though my parents weren't professors.

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[44] This evidence supports Dobbie and Fryer (2014)'s argument that high achieving peers influence student test performance and graduation outcomes.

Henry reasoned that he would experience better preparation for college only if his parents had the same careers that he aspired to--becoming a professor and a writer--and that this was not a legitimate or useful critique of his upbringing. He considered his family and high school to have offered him a decent preparation for college, and that the rest was up to him to adjust and up to the college to support him in that transition.

It is important to note that economics is entwined with academic preparation due to uneven educational opportunities afforded children growing up in neighborhoods with divergent home values and education budgets linked to local real estate tax revenues (Rothstein, 2015; Ryan, 2011). But this is not always the case: magnet schools may draw from several school districts, while open choice districts afford families from lower-income neighborhoods to send children to better resourced schools across the city. In some districts, despite high poverty rates and fewer financial resources for education compared to suburban districts, individual schools and entire school districts may beat the odds and produce well-prepared graduates (Kirp, 2015). Relevant to this study, the results are often that some low income students attend schools in high-income districts, enroll in private school on scholarship, or test into magnet programs that draw from a diverse catchment region. Likewise, middle and high income first-generation students may attend well-resourced or under-resourced high schools,

depending on parental understanding of the district's offerings, their preferences for their children, and the amount of work they can afford to undertake to secure their children's place in better performing schools.

The result is that both the socio-economic background and the experience of high school type of first-generation students who stated they felt as or more prepared for college varied widely. While this study did not ask participants to report parental income, most of the students naturally turned to social class when framing their pre-college preparation. While those first-generation students who reported feeling less prepared for college were more likely to identify as low-income, no similar pattern emerged for those who reported feeling as or more prepared. They identified as low income, middle income, and high income. They narrated differing histories of immigration, divergent family economic trajectories, examples of luck enabling unforeseen educational opportunities, and wide-ranging parental choices impacting their educational pathways. Several first-generation participants, Jason being one, even explained that while their grandparents attended college, their parents elected not to attend, making the grandchildren de facto "first-generation" in college admissions files and in our study despite a family history of college-going.

As with varying levels of economic capital, first-generation students who reported feeling as or more prepared for college appeared to arrive with varying

amounts of cultural capital, such as access to participation in cultural activities like the visual and performing arts; travel for educational, extracurricular, or entertainment purposes; and familiarity with social norms and behavioral expectations in different formal and informal social contexts. Again, Jason offers a telling example: although he grew up under constrained economic circumstances and was currently benefitting from a comprehensive need-based financial aid package, he considered his upbringing to be rich in cultural and social opportunities that provided him a direct advantage in college. To assume that because he was a full financial aid recipient he must also enter college with a lack of cultural or social capital would be both incorrect and potentially personally insulting. Moreover, Jason, an active mentor for other first-generation students on his campus, had advice regarding the acquisition and deployment of cultural and social capital to share with his first-generation peers. To downplay his personal experiences would be to ignore the potential benefit he could offer as a mentor to other first-generation students.

Many of these well-prepared first-generation students performed well in their first year and beyond. They emphasized that it is important to enter college motivated to succeed but also undeterred by initial setbacks such as poor first midterm grades. They underscored how important it was for them to meet peers from different backgrounds and to make connections with students they felt had

capacities or skills that could benefit them (see also Aries and Berman, 2012).

They emphasized that asking for help is a habit that accrues achievement rather

than a symptom of its dearth. Developing friendships with students from diverse

economic backgrounds could help first-generation students to see that hiring

tutors for challenging courses is not a sign of weakness or failure but rather a

strategy for ensuring success. With this goal in mind, students like Jason tended

to counsel fellow first-generation students to expand their social network and to

avoid self-selecting into lower-income only or first-generation only social

groups.[45]

Privileged Poor and Doubly Disadvantaged?

When evaluating self-assessed preparation for college, it is clear that

variation exists among first-generation college students at the two universities in

this sample. Variation also exists among continuing generation students,

primarily for those who attended lower resourced high schools. But the

difference in self-assessed preparation between first- and continuing generation

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[45] This was a common theme of advice among first-generation students who stated they felt as or more prepared for college. Their confidence in their college preparation enabled them to see themselves as similar to, rather than different from, their continuing generation peers, resulting in a lower sense of identification with first-generation students and skepticism that their first-generation status affects their identity or experiences while in college. These students were less likely to attend first-generation support groups, or if so, they offered their services as mentors rather than as recipients of support.

students is significant, indicating that first-generation students are in general more likely to enter college with self-perceptions of disadvantage. These are associated with their high school experiences more than their sense of innate capability, parental involvement, or motivation.[46] I will explore how first-generation students who begin with perceived disadvantages proceed through college at both Harvard and Georgetown in subsequent chapters. For now, though, I would like to explore possible evidence of a bimodal distribution among first-generation students that has been described for African-American students attending elite universities.

Studying primarily African-American student experiences at elite universities, sociology doctoral candidate Anthony Abraham Jack (2014, 2015) has created two "Weberian ideal types" to capture what he sees as a bimodal form of college-going among lower-income minorities: the *privileged poor* and the *doubly disadvantaged*.[47] The *privileged poor* are those African-American and Latinx

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[46] In order to better understand the connection between high school and these students' self-assessed preparation, I conducted an analysis of all first- and continuing generation students' responses concerning preparation and their high school's 'great schools rating' (greatschools.org). The analysis was incomplete, as only public schools are rated by this system, and I was only able to track the high school data of the Harvard cohort. Nonetheless, for public school graduates, there was a strong correlation among higher ranked schools and self-reports of "as" or "more" prepared (see Gable, 2014).

[47] The term "privileged poor" has been used in other contexts and at least as far back as the early 1980s to describe other social types, from government employees living in exorbitantly priced cities such as Washington, D.C. to young middle-class workers who eschew traditional employment or choose an itinerant lifestyle over job security. "Doubly disadvantaged" also extends to the early 1980s and has historically been used to describe people dealing with disabilities or severe health issues, especially in public health and education contexts.

youth who, at some point in their educational pathways, entered elite schooling

prior to college. They may have economic disadvantages or challenging family

situations, but their pre-college school experiences provide them with the kind of

cultural capital, social dispositions, networks, and tools for advancement (such

as ease with asking for help or assuming that authority figures are there to

support you) that are rewarded in higher education and beyond. The *privileged*

poor's initial entry into elite education may be varied: parents who were highly

motivated to find educational alternatives for their children uncovering and

applying for scholarship opportunities, teachers or foundations identifying

potential candidates for boarding schools from urban public school districts, or

family and friends helping to cover the cost of tuition or willing to provide their

billing addresses to secure a space in a high performing district tied to residential

zones. Whatever their background, however, Jack argues that their pre-college

experiences with elite education acclimate them to the performance expectations

of elite colleges, both socially and academically.

The *doubly disadvantaged*, by contrast, are those lower-income students

who enter college from under-resourced high schools and with no prior

experience with elite schooling. Their challenges are multiplied even if they are

provided generous financial aid by their colleges because they face both ongoing

financial constraints (such as affording meals out with friends or the managing

pressure to send income home to family) and also a "culture shock" of

immersion in a wealthy residential setting with academic and social expectations

that do not cohere with their prior educational experiences. Jack argues that the

doubly disadvantaged struggle more acutely with suspicions of not belonging or

feeling like an "admissions mistake."[48]

Jack describes a perceptual as well as an attitudinal difference between the

privileged poor and the *doubly disadvantaged*. He argues that the *privileged poor,*

because of their prior acclimation to bastions of privilege, "generally see

themselves as community members," equally "entitled" in their approach to

college as those students who from wealthier backgrounds (2014: 466). The

doubly disadvantaged, however, are more likely to feel "singled out" by professors,

distrust the administration as "full of shit" (while the *privileged poor* view

"administrators as collaborators"), and are wary of forging friendships with

upper income peers (2014: 466-467).

While there is evidence in this first-generation study to support some of

what Jack describes among lower income African-American students--for

instance, Jack's ideal types can be applied to the different personal narratives of

Salvi and Jason above--nonetheless, the variation in how first- and continuing

generation students talk about their own acclimation to college and their

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[48] While Jack does not use this specific phrase, many students in this study do and it is a
commonly used phrase among students and administrators (largely attempting to allay student
fears that they are *not* "admissions mistakes") at these two schools.

interaction with fellow students, professors, and administrators suggests that Jack's Weberian types may calcify categories that are a good deal more permeable in practice. Moreover, evidence among first-generation students in this study suggests that the motivation to belong (either through standing out or through assimilation) and the attitude of the participant can make a difference regardless of one's personal history with elite schooling.

A few examples help clarify this point. Beyond Jason, at least four first-generation students in this sample stood out as clearly matching Jack's description of the *privileged poor*. They are Ricky, Q, Gretchen, and Lin.[49] They all graduated from elite boarding or day schools. They all stated that they felt as or more prepared for college, crediting their high schools with acclimating them to the expectations of college. They all came from low-income backgrounds with varying levels of financial stress, including in some instances legal struggles with documentation status. They all spoke of having acquired the right behaviors to succeed in college: learning to ask for help, cultivating relationships with faculty and teaching staff, and building networks with diverse peers, for instance. I would argue that they fit Jack's description of the "privileged poor." But each of these students also narrated a good deal of struggle along the way, and were

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[49] Two of these students attended Georgetown and two attended Harvard.

loath to separate themselves from other low-income students because of their high school experiences.

For instance, when I sat down with Ricky on a Sunday afternoon for our interview, he launched into an impassioned diatribe against an opinion piece penned by Jack in *The New York Times* the month before[50]: "I felt like someone was whispering loudly about me across a room." Reading this article, he felt personally attacked by being singled out as "privileged" among his fellow lower-income Latino classmates at his elite university. "There are only so many of us here. We're so few. Why call us out like that?" Ricky explained that it was a struggle enough in his first years of college to find friends who understood him because he felt so liminal. He identified more with lower-income students from inner cities like his hometown, but they were at times suspicious of him because of his mannerisms acquired at boarding school. Q confessed a similar struggle feeling torn between two worlds, not quite as class-flexible as she would like. Gretchen and Lin both addressed the strain that attending their private high schools placed on their families. They underscored that school, including their current colleges, and home were like foreign countries to one another. They wondered what form of privilege it is to feel torn between one's home and school, one's past and present and one's potential future. While I do not suggest

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[50] A. A. Jack (2015, September 12), "What the Privileged Poor Can Teach Us," *The New York Times*, SR12

that Jack intends to characterize these students as having fewer struggles than the so-called *doubly disadvantaged*, to label these students *privileged* likely conveys that message.

On the other hand, was there evidence of the *doubly disadvantaged* in this study? Certainly, yes, there were students who embraced this moniker and narrated their experiences as such. For instance, two participants, Isabella and Ariana, specifically evoked this term and Jack's research to describe their experiences. They were active members and leaders of their campus student group dedicated to first-generation student issues, and they advocated for more specific institutional support targeted to students like themselves. They were grateful for the terms—*privileged poor* and *doubly disadvantaged*—that they felt explained why some low-income and minority students transitioned to college more easily than others. But other lower-income students who also graduated from struggling school districts in rural or urban city centers actively chafed at the term. Salvi, who said his personal mantra was *"Why not be great?"*, explained that while he is an active participant in at least two ethnic student associations and is comfortable talking about growing up in a lower-income, majority-minority urban community, he nonetheless avoids the first-generation student group because of what he sees as its members' present propensity to consider themselves victims. "That attitude is not going to help you achieve, if you're a

victim. I think it's all about political correctness. I'm against this kind of coddling. I have agency. I can make my life as I want it by virtue of my hard work."

Another student, Jackie, talked about growing up in one of the poorest, most violent neighborhoods in her large southern city. She was the daughter of Latin-American immigrants whose formal educations were cut short by the imperative to earn an income. But instead of framing her childhood as one of misfortune, she spoke at length about how lucky she was to be afforded opportunities in her life, such as winning a prestigious national scholarship and earning a place at her highly selective college. She dedicated those successes to her parents. If she was characterized as "disadvantaged" by her university, then it might make the mistake of assuming that it, the university (and not her parents) was the hero of her personal narrative. Jackie bristled at this thought. "It wasn't Harvard that made me. It was my parents that made me. Harvard is not the hero. My parents are." Jackie argued for her college to embrace the diverse students they recruited, and to support them through the potentially challenging transition. She argued for extra services, not dedicated specifically to first-generation students but to all incoming students who may come from diverse backgrounds and who for a variety of reasons may not be well versed in the expectations of college. But she underscored that the university should value its

diverse students by respecting their personal histories and acknowledging parental contributions and individual agency on the part of lower-income students.

Jackie was not bashful about talking about the challenges she faced growing up, but she refused to distill her narrative as one of disadvantage. She and others in this sample pointed out that this narrative omits personal agency and fortune from their stories. She also underscored that the position of disadvantage and the position of privilege are exactly that: positions that may shift given different circumstances. Jackie, who plans to run for public office and eventually make it onto the presidential ticket in 2040, juxtaposed her disadvantage and privilege in order to inspire others, not to evoke pity: "I know how privileged I am. As a first-generation student coming from an impoverished background with immigrant parents, I have a six figure salary lined up for right after graduation. Doors are continuing to open for me, which is not true for so many people. I've been fortunate enough."

Many students in this sample who spoke of challenging economic backgrounds coupled with underfunded and lower resourced high schools fit Anthony Jack's characterization of the *doubly disadvantaged*. They advocated for pre-college and ongoing institutional support, as well as the opportunity to talk about their challenges in a nonjudgmental environment--both solutions offered

by Jack to alleviate the unequal preparation levels and fears of not belonging by low-income students recruited to elite colleges. The lessons that Jack highlights about the *privileged poor* and *doubly disadvantaged*--especially that low-income students enter elite colleges with a range of preparation levels and acclimation to college expectations--are important ones, and the findings from this study support his theory. However, it may be more useful to consider these not as binary labels but as shifting categories that illuminate the dialectic and flexible narrative of many first-generation students who are at once privileged and disadvantaged, fortunate and not always so, impacted by their environment and yet agents of their own destinies.[51]

Shifting Self-Perception

One of the benefits of a longitudinal study is that participants have an opportunity to reflect on and potentially revise or clarify prior interview responses at different points along their educational journey. At this stage in the research, our participants have completed interviews as sophomores and again as seniors. I will discuss their shifting notions of their academic and social

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[51] Raising this point, a Sarah Lawrence College student, Natasha Rodriguez, wrote an op-ed in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "Who Are You Calling Underprivileged" (2014), arguing that these terms make presumptions about students' pre-college lives that may be inaccurate or based on false notions of privilege. She concluded, "this kind of labeling has to stop...I am a student in need; I'm just not an underprivileged one."

experiences while in college in subsequent chapters. But for now, what, if anything, has changed in their self-assessment of preparation for college?

Among the 91 first-generation repeat participants, 12 revised their self-assessment downward from as or more prepared to less prepared. The percentage of first-generation students who reported feeling less prepared for college increased from 44% to 57%. Among the 35 continuing generation participants, 3 revised their self-assessment downward and 3 revised it upward. The percentage of continuing generation students who reported feeling less prepared for college remained stable at 20% (see *Table 4* above). What were these students' reasons for altering their self-assessment of college preparation between sophomore and senior year?

For some first-generation students, like Henry the aforementioned aspiring academic and writer, they revised their responses moderately downward in order to articulate the amount of effort it took for them to achieve as well in college as they did in high school. When asked how prepared he felt for college, Henry responded:

> Academically, not really. I guess not horribly. I definitely had a lot to learn. I had a friend here who is from my high school and he is now a freshman and he came into work today and said, 'It's so much harder here!' I guess English, which is what I study now, I had learned how to close read but not at the same level. And my writing wasn't really there yet. So I had to work hard at that when I got here. The rigor was a big leap.

Let us compare Henry's senior response to his sophomore one when asked the same question:

> Fine, I guess. I came into school with a general high school knowledge...I think any catch-up I had to play, like any catch-up skills, was just the transition to college. It seems as though a lot of people went through that.

When asked what happened in the intervening years to change Henry's self-assessment, he indicated that through his experiences in college he came to reevaluate his high school's rigor. This revision was common for all of the students who altered their assessment of preparation downward, first- and continuing generation alike.

Henry also raised two issues that repeated in other first-generation interviews. First, Henry explained that he did not yet know what he did not know during his sophomore interview.[52] At that point he was still becoming aware of the intellectual journey he would take to pursue his vocational goals. Henry took a philosophical stance, pointing out that the journey of becoming an artist and/or scholar was a perennial self-fashioning and re-fashioning. This, in part, affected his senior self-assessment of preparation. As a sophomore, he considered achieving A's and B's in his courses to be a sign of his success. But as

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[52] Henry's point about 'not knowing what you do not know' was also made by Sue Brown, Assistant Director of Advising Programs and Assistant Dean of Harvard College (personal interview, September 30, 2015). Brown advocates for proactive pre-college and ongoing academic programming for first-generation and low-income students because many of these students are unaware of the gaps in their education and may not know when to seek out help. See *page 83* of this chapter.

a senior, he was more ruthless in his self-evaluation --whether his papers were nominated for prizes, whether he impressed his teachers with his work--of his intellectual growth. By senior year his grades were less of a concern, but his depth of understanding was paramount. He revised his self-assessment of preparation downward in part because he could see that his skills and knowledge were more superficial and inchoate in his freshman year than he would have liked, and perhaps less well-formed than those of some of his current peers and competitors in his academic concentration. It is not necessarily alarming that seniors are more knowledgeable and thus more self-critical than sophomores. But given that more first-generation seniors than continuing generation seniors self-critique by revising their estimation of preparation downward, it is a point worth noting and incorporating into faculty advising.

While Henry's first point will be of interest to faculty advisers, his second point will concern administrators and policymakers, as it resonates with Jack's (2014) argument regarding the *doubly disadvantaged* (a term Henry would not use to describe himself), and has a simple policy takeaway. Henry couched his assessment of preparation in the context of not feeling entitled to ask for help early in college, while assuming that other students--particularly those with college graduate parents--were less inhibited to do so. This was not due to attendance at an under-resourced high school--in fact, Henry attended a high

performing high school--but rather his lack of awareness that he could ask for

assistance in college without being stigmatized.

> I think the biggest difficulty, because I read articles on this, is feeling
> like you have a right to take advantage of certain things on campus.
> First-generation students are sometimes scared of asserting their
> position, taking what they need. The idea of taking a professor's time
> made me very uncomfortable. Now as a senior I understand how this
> place works and that's what you do, but as a freshman it was very
> scary. In this place you have to think you are more important than you
> might think you are.

Henry advocated for a mandatory pre-college or early-college boot camp,

mandatory because he otherwise would not have elected to attend it. The boot

camp would discuss items like how to speak up in class, the importance of

attending office hours, and the value in asking for help from faculty and teaching

staff, among other resources on campus.

Henry's insights reverberated in other first-generation seniors' responses.

Rory, another student who revised her self-assessment downward, lamented, "I

didn't know what I didn't have." She, too, advocated for a mandatory boot camp

to provide students with simple tools, not to overcome a lack of college

preparation but to equip them with the mindset and habits to succeed in college.

At one point in the interview she explained,

> Seeing people whose parents went to college and especially those who
> went to Harvard, I saw that they had better insights than I did, and I
> didn't get these things until the end of my junior year. For example,
> going to office hours, the importance of forming relationship with your
> professors. Friends of mine whose parents specifically went to Harvard

they knew how to do these things right away, and knew the value of
them. In my experience, I saw that it was more of the parent influence
than the high school you went to that affected the college experience,
especially early on.

Rory, a graduate from an elite private high school, pointed out, "A lot of people

who come to Harvard are used to figuring things out on their own. In high

school the people you see seeking out help are those who are really struggling.

So you have this image, you don't ask for help unless you're struggling." That

vision changed for her over time. Now Rory sees the value in asking for

assistance early and often, and advocates for a pre-orientation or orientation

program that would encourage all students to embrace assistance-seeking as a

normal practice for high achievers, too. At the same time, however, she questions

the benefit of creating first-generation only groups or characterizing first-

generation students as facing singular challenges compared to continuing

generation students.

Learning when and whom to ask for help, attending office hours, viewing

faculty and administrators as collaborators--all of these insights were

underscored by the students in our sample who revised their self-assessment, as

well as those students who entered college feeling less prepared. Their

perspective was not unlike Salvi's from the beginning of this chapter, who

focused on his lack of preparation not as an identity marker of being first-

generation but as the result of his high school experiences. When asked whether

he would have sought out a first-generation mentor, Salvi responded negatively:

> Whenever they do this stuff it's very much like putting yourself as a
> victim. And I feel like the institution would put me as a victim if they
> had that. Get more creative than that. It may be well-intended but it's
> usually poorly executed.

Yet when asked whether the university should create a pre-orientation program

"to help some students hit the ground running," he lit up:

> That would be cool. But being very real. Look, schools that don't send
> kids to the Ivy League do not prepare kids for the Ivy League. When
> you come from a school like that, like I did, you were a big fish in a
> small pond. And now, coming to Harvard, we get to this ocean and
> they're like, 'Swim, motherfucker!'

Salvi's grim humor was leavened by his narrative of increasing success in college

(which I will return to in subsequent chapters), but the gravity of his comments

should not go unheeded. For him and for other strivers arriving at elite colleges

with fewer tools and habits to succeed academically, the mental, psychological,

and technical challenges can feel overwhelming.[53] It is imperative the universities

recruiting such students find ways to attenuate and reduce the time it takes for

such students to transition to higher academic expectations and different

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[53] A recent Harris Poll sponsored by the Jed Foundation and the Steve Fund, a foundation named
for an African-American Harvard graduate who committed suicide in 2014, found a racial
disparity in feelings of preparation for college as well as the inclination to ask for help among
under-represented minorities in college. This poll underscores the need for universities to be
more proactive in supporting both the academic needs and mental health of students arriving
feeling less prepared for college, and indicates that under-represented minorities may be
especially at risk (Brown, 2016).

academic habits. At the same time, they must accommodate the variation in students' self-perceptions of their first-generation status (and their desire to self-identify as such among their peers) as relevant to their academic experiences.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Examining first- and continuing generation students' perceived preparation for college, it is clear that a higher percentage of first-generation students arrive feeling less prepared for college than their continuing generation peers. Scrutinizing how students talk about preparation, however, first-generation status does not appear to be as much a categorical reason for perceived lack of preparation but rather an issue of intensity. Students whose parents did not attend college, or even an elite college, are more likely to discuss feeling surprised by their lack of preparation compared with continuing generation students from similar high schools. First-generation students who feel less prepared for college are more likely to worry about belonging, achievement, and lack of academic fit. But they describe these concerns as associated more with their high school experiences than with the condition of being first-generation. Some continuing generation students spoke of their experiences as similar to first-generation students, largely due to similar economic and high school backgrounds. This provides further evidence that high school matters as

much and in some cases perhaps more than first-generation status when predicting students' self-perceptions of their preparation for college. More first-generation students than continuing generation students attended lower resourced high schools, and they were also more likely to express concerns about their disparate preparation for college.

Targeted programming to improve the transition to college appears to be a solution for first-generation students who arrive with academic deficits. But executing a successful program entails understanding the complexity of the first-generation experience as well as its correspondence with other demographic subgroups on campus. Who should be invited to such a program? Should it be mandatory or voluntary? Many students in this sample resisted the idea of a mandatory pre-orientation or orientation session, but some argued that a mandatory session would benefit those who arrive unaware of the gaps in their skills, dispositions, and habits. And while there is a compelling case for first-generation-specific programming, continuing generation students from lower resourced high schools would also benefit from an academic pre-orientation. Lower-income students, regardless of first-generation status, would also benefit. But as Jason pointed out, there are risks to isolating low-income and/or first-generation students in their first weeks of college. They may be less inclined to

seek friendships across economic groups if they have already formed close bonds among other first-generation or low-income students prior to freshman year.

Likewise, first-generation students who arrive feeling as or more prepared for college can provide insights and offer mentorship to first-generation students who arrive feeling less prepared. If a university-sponsored program separates first-generation students by preparation levels, then the kind of academic and social support that better prepared first-generation students may have to offer would be squandered by the university. And if the university has an interest in touting the achievements of its first-generation graduates, then it would behoove the institution to encourage maximal intermingling among well prepared and less well prepared first-generation students as well as among first- and continuing generation students from diverse backgrounds. Perhaps the best solution is to advance a host of activities, including targeted pre-orientation programming, ongoing academic support and mentorship, social activities that encourage bond formation across social groups, and a mentorship program that incorporates and possibly pairs well prepared and struggling first-generation students, or older students like Salvi who overcame academic hurdles and can offer advice to younger near-peers.[54] Some programming might be targeted

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[54] The work of Stephens et al. (2015, 2015) suggests that near-peer narratives of success, offered to freshmen in workshop settings during college orientation, have a positive impact on first-year academic outcomes. This low-cost activity may foster belonging and establish role modeling throughout the first year and beyond.

specifically to first-generation students, while additional support may extended

to all students either through mandatory sessions or co-curricular offerings. In

the end what is revealed by reviewing the responses to a simple dichotomous

question about preparation is that there is no simple prediction to be made or

rules to follow regarding how students will respond to their perceived college

preparation (or lack thereof) based on their first-generation status. Instead, first-

generation students identify as prepared or not in a variety of ways, and respond

to that preparation in equally variable fashion. Flexible and ongoing

programming that is responsive to students' requests will provide the most

support for first-generation students as a whole, a group that is undoubtedly a

complex and growing demographic on elite campuses.

Chapter 4: On Academic Experiences

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore how first- and continuing generation students at elite universities talk about their academic experiences in college. Are there differences in the ways in which first-generation and continuing generation students assess their academic experiences and the academic choices they make? If there are differences, then what can they tell us about how the first-generation experience may be unique, or how the first-generation experience may overlap with other kinds of experiences on campus (i.e. those related to socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and gender). Finally, how can the first- and continuing generation student evaluations of their academic experiences better inform university administrators and policymakers as they seek to establish programs and practices to support all of their students? I explore these questions in the context of what students say about their academic majors, the academic pathways they travel, any potential roadblocks they face, and finally, their assessment of academic satisfaction as sophomores and again as seniors.

I argue that the ways of talking about academic experiences first- and continuing generation students deploy are complex and not wholly explained by whether or not their parents have college-going experience. Indeed, high school

experiences and personal motivation account for much of the academic decision-

making described by first- and continuing generation students alike. Whether a

student felt like he or she was able to exercise academic choices also mattered

with regard to his/her academic satisfaction—that is, whether a student felt he or

she was free to elect among academic pathways or felt that certain pathways

were unfairly foreclosed because of prior experiences or challenges early in

college. More first-generation students in this sample spoke of overcoming

hurdles due to their background or high school experiences, and they were also

more likely to be surprised by these academic obstacles than their continuing

generation peers. But, when given support and encouragement by faculty and

staff, as well as the scaffolding to respond to academic challenges, first-

generation students were equally likely to rate their academic experiences highly

and to express both satisfaction with and hope for continued academic success.

A Snapshot of First- & Continuing Generation Students in the Sample

First-generation and continuing generation students at Harvard and

Georgetown graduate at similarly high rates, well above 95% per cohort. As

senior administrators such as Georgetown's Dean of Admissions Charles Deacon

argue, while there is a significant college completion gap between first- and

continuing generation students across the United States, the problem at elite universities is different. Deacon said of the purpose of this study:

> The point is not to see whether first-generation students graduate at equally high rates. They all graduate at the same rates at elite schools. Sometimes first-generation students even graduate at higher rates, like our GSP kids. So the point is not whether they graduate. The point is to ensure that our low-income and first-generation students thrive here. That they feel equally that they are included and have the same opportunities afforded them through their educations that continuing generation students do.[55]

This chapter explores the academic component of student thriving through individual narratives rating levels of satisfaction, integration, and personal evaluations of academic achievements and challenges. Before delving into the ways in which first- and continuing generation students describe their academic experiences in college, I will first provide a few figures for reference. As indicated above, first- and continuing generation students in our sample graduate at similarly high rates, and similarly "on time," or within 8 semesters. As a whole, 87% of first-generation seniors, and 94% of continuing generation seniors were either satisfied or very satisfied with their overall major experience. However, 36% of first-generation students and 12% of continuing generation students switched majors some time between sophomore and senior year. Those who changed majors were satisfied with their final choice, but were likely to be less satisfied with their original major selection. This figure, combined with the

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[55] Charles Deacon, informational interview, September 24, 2015.

percentage of first-generation seniors who reported feeling "neutral" or "dissatisfied" with their major by their senior year interview (13%), indicates that at some point in their academic trajectory close to 50% of first-generation students in this sample (compared to just under 20% for continuing generation students) were less satisfied with their major than they would have preferred. In open-ended responses, first-generation students also spoke less often academic awards than their continuing generation peers and were less likely to write a capstone or senior thesis.[56] These figures indicate that first-generation students were more likely to face difficulty in their chosen major, or to switch majors and potentially deal with the challenge of "catching up" in their new field.

The most popular type of major for first- and continuing generation students was social science, at 62% for first-generation (FG) and 43% for continuing generation (CG) seniors. The second most popular major was natural science, at 24% FG and 26% CG, often with these students indicating an interest in pursuing graduate work in medicine or the health professions. Continuing generation students were more represented in the arts and humanities (11%CG v 7% FG), and in the portion of STEM majors that includes math, engineering and computer science (17% CG v 4% FG). The starkest contrast in these figures appears in the non-medical STEM track.

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[56] At Harvard, the senior thesis rate was 36% for first-generation seniors and 54.5% for continuing generation seniors. At Georgetown, the overall numbers were lower for both first- and continuing generation seniors due to different capstone requirements in the School of Nursing & Health Studies and the Business School. Both of these schools require their seniors to complete a capstone course, but a written thesis is not always required.

Figure 6: Academic Majors, FG & CG
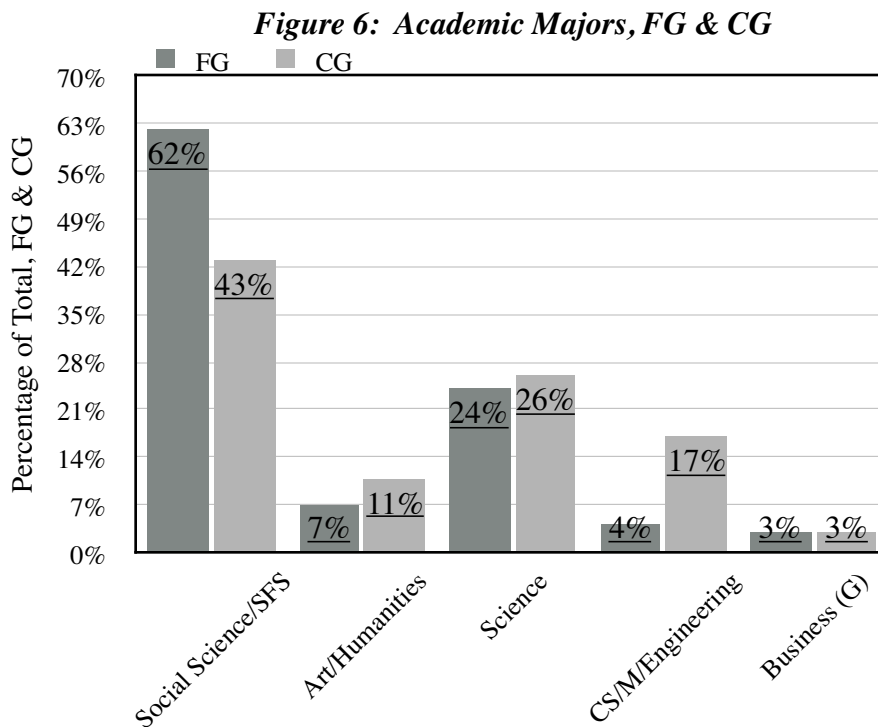
In open-ended responses, first-generation students were more apt to explain that they chose their major because they hoped it would lead to a remunerative career. They were more likely than their continuing generation peers to double major or hold a "secondary" in a concentration that they wanted for themselves, with their first major being a pragmatic choice either to please their parents or to gain skills for a desired career path (accounting, economics, natural sciences). Some first-generation students even ruminated on the major they would have selected if they felt liberated to choose without consequence; this rumination was not a narrative pattern found among continuing generation responses.

Academic Preparation and College Choices: Continuation or Divergence

In the previous chapter, I explored how first-generation and continuing generation students spoke of their preparation for college, reflecting on freshman year first as sophomores and again as seniors. There was a statistically significant difference between first-generation students, roughly 50% of whom said they felt as or more prepared for college, and continuing generation students, 80% of whom said the same thing. That percentage declined by more than 10% for first-generation seniors, with a dozen students revising their self-assessed preparation downward from sophomore year. This significant difference in self-assessed preparation could effect students' academic motivation (Grabau, 2009), choice of major (ACT, 2014; USDOE, 2013), intellectual self-concept (Griffin et al., 2010;), or career plans (Rivera, 2015). If so, this may confirm previously introduced evidence by sociologists of differential pathways in elite colleges (Stuber, 2011; Jack, 2014, 2015; Rivera, 2015), extending above and beyond students' choices of career paths to fit their ethical and aesthetic worldview (Damon, 2008, 2015; Clydesdale, 2015). Was there evidence in this study of students' actual and perceived preparation affecting their academic choices or their career plans?

To answer this question, I first asked whether there is a connection, in participants' estimation, between high school experiences and college choices. In

the previous chapter I established that students who attended well resourced high schools felt as or more prepared for college at higher rates than those who attended lower resourced high schools. Did high school experience also affect students' academic choices while in college? Were certain pathways facilitated or foreclosed by high school experiences?

In the follow-up senior interview, interviewers asked both first-generation and continuing generation participants whether they thought their high school preparation affected their academic choices in college. Curiously, first-generation and continuing generation students responded affirmatively or negatively to this question at similar rates. Approximately 55% of our sample, equally distributed among first-generation and continuing generation participants, explained that their high school preparation affected their college choices, while 45% reported that their high school experiences did not affect their college choices. Given that this is a small sample, in our participants' estimation, whether or not their high school affected their college choices was virtually a coin toss. That finding may come as a surprise to scholars who focus on institutional contexts shaping life outcomes, as no clear pattern emerged to correlate high school quality and students' estimation that their high school impacted their college choices. One way to interpret this finding is to focus on how our participants described the trajectory between high school and college, and whether they were satisfied with

their college outcomes. Our participants' sense of internal or external motivation, self-efficacy, and personal choice played an integral role in shaping this element of their overall academic narrative.[57]

This study did not directly ask about students' perceived self-efficacy outside of the interview context.[58] Nonetheless, students spoke of their academic choices in a manner that underscores a personal measure of self-efficacy and academic self-concept that is useful for administrative and co/curricular policy and planning. For instance, our participants spoke of the academic choices they made in their transition to college as movement along distinctive academic pathways (Barnett & Bragg, 2006; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). This movement, beginning with an initial self-assessment of as/more or less prepared for college, may then be divided into two basic initial directions (with opportunity to leap from one to the next as a new semester begins, an opportunity that diminishes over the course of the student's college years): *academic continuation* or *academic divergence. Academic continuation* can be defined as when a student follows a similar academic concentration to what he/she pursued or showed interest in earlier in his or her school context. *Academic divergence*, by contrast, occurs when a student opts for a completely new or different enough academic specialization

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[57] For more on students' motivation, self-efficacy, and choice, Bain, 2012; and Light, 2001.

[58] For more on academic self-efficacy and the choice of college majors among women, underrepresented minorities, and first-generation students, see Betts & Hackett, 1983; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2011; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005; and Hsieh, Sullivan, and Guerra, 2007.

from what he/she focused on in high school. *Academic divergence* can also occur when no specialization took place in high school and the student had little exposure to the variety of academic opportunities afforded by his/her college.

Neither pathway—*academic continuation* or *academic divergence*—is inherently superior or easier than the other, but movement along either pathway may account for the different ways that students narrate their relative comfort and satisfaction with their academic experiences in college. How the student then assesses the process or outcomes of his/her choice of *academic continuation* or *academic divergence* then impacts his/her estimation of academic satisfaction in college. These choices along academic pathways are individual and interconnected, and I posit that understanding how first-generation and continuing generation students describe their choices is an important step in understanding how to foster thriving among all learners and especially those who need the most institutional support.

Figure 7: Narrating the Pathway Through College: Preparation, Choice, Satisfaction
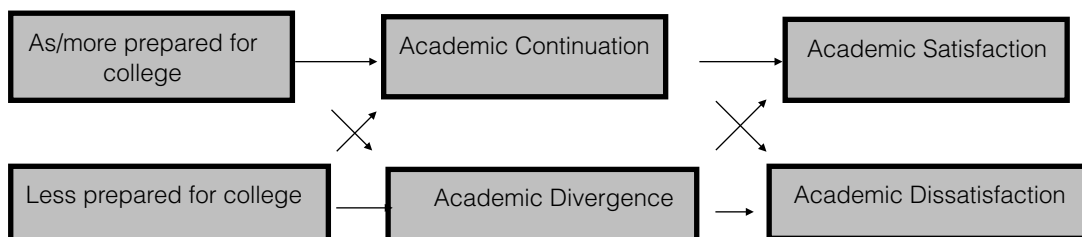
Academic Continuation

Approximately 55% of the participants in this sample described *academic continuation* between high school and college. This group included equal numbers of students who reported feeling as/more prepared for college and those who reported feeling less prepared for college. There appeared to be no correlation between high school preparation and the choice of *academic continuation* per se. However, for those who described *academic continuation* between high school and college, these college seniors almost uniformly spoke of discovering their strengths (and sometimes detecting and avoiding their weaknesses) in specific courses in high school. This was equally true for students who reported feeling as/more prepared for college as it was for those who reported feeling less prepared for college. These students entered college prepared to further develop their capabilities in subject areas where they had cultivated an interest and experienced prior rewards. They could also be students who found their sense of academic or vocational purpose prior to college (Damon, 2008).

There was a difference in the way that students from well-resourced and lower-resourced high schools described this choice of *academic continuation*. For students who attended resource rich high schools, they discussed exposure to a wide variety of subjects, enabling them to understand and anticipate the

diversity of options in college. That early exposure allowed them to select in advance an academic pathway that they believed would reward and further hone their skills. For example, Irene, a continuing generation participant who attended a well-resourced all-girls K-12 private school, explained during her first interview, "I did a lot of research before [selecting my courses], and I took classes that I was interested in and with subjects I had been interested in and good at in high school." Again as a senior, Irene described how her high school experiences shaped her academic choices in college:

> In high school, I did most well in my English courses and enjoyed them the most. So I knew that what I wanted to take at Harvard had to do with English, textual analysis, and culture and literature. Also it helped me figure out what I didn't want to take. I did well in all of my high school classes but I knew I didn't want to major in STEM because I got exposure to that early on and knew it wasn't for me.

Similarly, J.B., another continuing generation participant who attended an elite boarding school abroad, explained:

> _JB_: "I think that my school was very good at preparation, because of its intensity and quality. The subjects I specialized in were at a high level, the college level in every one. The transition to college work was very smooth compared to my peers. Even now I still feel the resonance of that. I really liked my high school."
> _Interviewer_: "Looking back, do you think your level of high school preparation affected your course choices at Harvard?"
> _JB_: "Yes. Because I was forced to choose my specialty when I was 16, my course selection reflects that specialization. I haven't gone into hard math or sciences in part because of that selection earlier."

For those who attended resource rich high schools, a choice of *academic continuation* was narrated as a privilege afforded them through high school exposure to quality academics. This was true not only for those who attended private schools but also for students who attended highly rated public schools. This finding held true for continuing generation students like Irene and J.B. above, and also for first-generation students in the sample who said they felt as or more prepared for college. Stone, a first-generation participant from a small town in Connecticut, offers a typical response of those first-generation students who narrated *academic continuation* based on a strong high school background:

> I think my high school did a really good job. My small town has a lot of doctors and engineers and they poured money into my STEM classes in high school. I feel like I was really prepared in that. For the social sciences, not as much because my high school focused on STEM and English…Academically it wasn't a hard transition from high school… At first I tried to do things I hadn't done in high school. I looked into international affairs, and I wanted to see what it was like. I tried that out and found quickly that I liked the sciences more than the social sciences. I decided to switch back to classes I had taken in high school and extending what I had learned form high school. (pauses) I had some really great teachers in high school. I still think back to that a lot. My teachers exposed us to college level material early, and I hear that in my courses now.

Similarly, Gretchen, a first-generation participant who had attended a private day school on scholarship, had the opportunity to take a high quality computer science course before college and made the decision to major in computer science even before she began her freshman year. When asked whether her high school

experiences impacted her college choices, she focused on *academic continuation* above and beyond basic study and time management strategies learned in high school: "I came in knowing I wanted to do CS [computer science]. That's not common with others who come in. It was really nice because in the first year I knocked off four requirements out of ten for the major. That's a lot."

But the pathway of *academic continuation* was not solely traveled by those students who felt well prepared by their high schools. Some students who came into college feeling less prepared also framed their choices in terms of *academic continuation*. For those students, the same strategy of *academic continuation* issued from an impulse of survival. Unlike those who chose *academic continuation* because of increased confidence in a particular subject area, those feeling less prepared for college made the choice to continue pursuing their high school strengths in order to mitigate academic risk.

Erik's description of his academic path underscores this point. When asked whether his high school preparation affected his college choices, he said, "I chose the only concentration I was prepared for. English was good enough." Asked if he would have preferred a different major, he responded yes:

> Maybe the honors English track, or History and Literature[59], which is more rigorous and requires more of you. In both of those paths it

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[59] History and Literature is a concentration that, as the name implies, combines the study of literature with the study of history. It is an honors concentration requiring 14 courses and includes a senior thesis. The English concentration has an honors option as well, which also requires 14 courses and a thesis, but the elective track for English requires 11 courses and no thesis.

requires more research, higher analytical skills. Doing it enough times, it becomes second nature to know the process of preparing for and writing an essay. I would have needed more practice where I felt comfortable writing a 10-page paper. I didn't have that.

Erik was the valedictorian of a mid-sized minority-majority high school in the U.S. South with a "below average" Great Schools rating. A Latino first-generation student whose immigrant parents did not have the opportunity to extend their formal educations beyond middle school, Erik felt like he was on his own, both literally and metaphorically, as he traveled from home to his elite college. Diverging from the expectations of his family and the norms of his hometown, he was casting out on a new life while also focusing on academic subjects he knew he could do well in order to minimize the potential for failure. He did so because he felt that his family could not help him navigate college. During his sophomore interview he had elaborated his take on the variation in the first-generation experience as it relates to parental background:

> I think that there are many levels of first generation college students. In my case my parents did not pass sixth grade. There are others whose parents did not graduate high school, and others whose parents attended but did not graduate college. I think that is a key distinction in the way that first generation students experience their college years differently.

As a senior, Erik underscored that he did not have models—either from home or among his peers—of students like himself who had gone through his elite college, and so he was trying his best to make do and to create his own model of

and for success. Part of this strategy entailed relying on what he knew to be his academic strengths. He described how his high school preparation impacted his college choices:

> My high school never sent anyone to an Ivy League college. Usually my school sends students to the state universities…Those that go to college that don't go to those will go to community college or some of the regional colleges. That is the scope of where my classmates went and where my sister is going. I think if I had attended [my state's flagship university] it would have been a smoother transition than going to Harvard. Partly because of academics. In comparison to other departments, my high school had a good English department, but the math and science education was fairly weak… I felt like my background was solid in English. My concentration here is English.

Despite his choice of English as a safe academic concentration given his high school strengths, the choice of *academic continuation* to mitigate risk did not insure an easy transition into Erik's major. He still felt out of place in his concentration. To elaborate on this dis-ease, Erik described his fear of raising his hand during lecture to ask a question: "Not knowing what a thing is about, are you going to raise your hand to stop a lecture? No." He described his anxiety about participating during section and demonstrating that he did not have prior exposure to a particular text or, as some of his peers did, read it in the original (non-English) language. He battled a nagging concern that his teaching aides would consider him "that kid who doesn't talk."[60] And he dreaded attending his

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[60]Erik's fear of gaining a reputation as the student who did not speak, thereby jeopardizing his participation grade, was a common concern among first-generation students and one that generally did not come up in continuing generation interviews.

department's office hours, in part because the timing did not accommodate his work schedule and in part because it either felt awkward—"you need a question but you don't have a question"—or like "a nice chat that never goes anywhere." Eventually Erik realized that he was spending more time interacting with his professors and co-workers in the computer science department where he worked than in his own academic concentration.

Erik's choice of *academic continuation* from his high school strengths served him well enough to get by, but not well enough to excel in his early college experiences. In fact, it may have exacerbated a period of prolonged uneasiness during his sophomore year, especially directly after he declared his major and realized that he would have to enroll in three challenging major courses during his sophomore spring term. It was not until he began to take courses that blended literary theory with another strength from high school—film production —and a newly found passion—computer science—that he began to soar academically and in his intellectual self-concept. Producing a web-based film series, writing critically about specific film genres, and working on web productions and presentations for the computer science department during his junior year all gave him the confidence and clarity to pursue a vocational pathway that he considered both challenging and rewarding. This opportunity was found outside of his major, and only after his first two years in college.

As I will argue at the end of this chapter, Erik may have identified his vocational pathway sooner if he had been given the opportunity to explore earlier in college without feeling like he should rely on his prior strengths in order to get by. Changes in both the major selection process and in the structure of the first semester of college could afford students like Erik the opportunity to consider riskier academic pathways early in their college years. Erik and peers like him also indicated that they were unaware of the kinds of opportunities afforded them at their elite college due to the narrowness of their high school curriculum. For example, first-generation Salvi, who was introduced in Chapter 3, recalled his choice of *academic continuation* based on familiarity rather than a strong interest to resume his high school academic trajectory:

> I didn't know half the names of these subjects or anything. Through the course search, I looked at the disciplines I already knew I liked. I wasn't looking for things that were different. I never looked for things I'd never heard of, of course. I had this ignorance of how the system works.

For students who were not exposed to a variety of course offerings in high school, encouragement to explore during freshman and even sophomore year, coupled with lowered stakes for potential missteps, would afford these students an opportunity to choose a new academic path if they so desired rather than electing for *academic continuation* out of fear or lack of adequate information.

One final point regarding students' descriptions of *academic continuation*

bears noting: while this study did not focus on students' choice of major beyond

asking whether there was an identifiable difference in major selection between

first- and continuing generation participants, an important pattern related to

STEM was discovered. Students who reported feeling less prepared for college

were more likely to say that this preparation affected their decision to pursue

STEM courses. They generally avoided science and math courses even if they

expressed an interest in these subjects, and they transferred out of declared

science and math majors at higher rates than their peers who reported feeling as

or more prepared for college.[61] This pattern was more pronounced among the

first-generation sample, as there were more first-generation participants who

discussed entering college assuming they would pursue a STEM pathway but

who quickly felt overwhelmed by their introductory or "weed-out" courses. It is

possible that continuing generation students who chose against STEM made that

decision earlier in high school, and the pattern in our sample indicates that first-

generation students come to this decision later in their academic course.

Nonetheless, it marks a disturbing trend away from STEM especially among

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[61] For example, at Harvard 6 first-generation participants who reported feeling less well prepared for college exited STEM by their senior year interview, while 2 participants (one first-generation and one continuing generation) who reported feeling as prepared for college exited STEM by their senior interview. These numbers are small, so I would not overemphasize them as "findings." Rather, they assist in the development of a larger picture of variation among first-generation students.

first-generation students who indicate a desire and motivation to pursue STEM

in college.

This pattern away from STEM was not true for one group of participants:

the first-generation students enrolled in Georgetown's School of Nursing and

Health Studies (NHS). Uniformly, the students in this program reported feeling

comfortable with and satisfied in their challenging NHS majors regardless of

high school preparation, largely attributing their satisfaction to a welcoming and

well structured department with multiple faculty mentors available for all

enrolled students, and a peer culture of collaboration rather than competition.

Georgetown's NHS is a relatively small program, however, and its success with

its students is likely also associated with the ability and desire of its faculty and

staff to support all of their students on an individual and sustained level.

Moreover, the program is transparently structured, with clear progression from

one semester to the next. Larger or more research-focused programs and

departments may not focus specifically on undergraduate success, and as such

first-generation, minority, and low-income students may feel less supported in

such departments (*for instance, see* Hurtado et al., 2011; Cole & Espinoza, 2008;

Wang, 2013). Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, for the subsample of our first-

generation participants enrolled in NHS, they reported high levels of satisfaction

and self-efficacy in the pursuit of their STEM degrees.

Academic Divergence

Approximately 45% of this study's participants, in equal proportion first- and continuing generation, indicated that they felt their high school preparation and experiences did not affect their college choices. They described their academic pathways in college in terms of *academic divergence*, or a distinct academic pathway than the ones they traveled in high school. These students articulated an *academic divergence* for multiple reasons, mostly positive but some negative. Additionally, all first-generation students in our sample who reported *academic divergence* described developing sustained and transformative relationships with either the academic material they pursued or with individual faculty who mentored them, often from a surprise course enrollment. Their stories resonated with Ken Bain's (2012) description of what the "best students"[62] do: they "take a phenomenal class, often far afield from their major area of study, and use their experiences in that course to change their lives." Indeed, it is worth underscoring that all participants in this study who described their experiences as *academic divergence* reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their ultimate choice of major. While sometimes lamenting what they perceived as lost time by wandering through multiple unrelated courses, they reaped greater

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[62] For Bain, a longtime advocate for engaged college teaching (see 2004), the "best students" are not always those with the highest GPA's or whose post-graduate earnings are the greatest, but those who use their college educations to pursue lives of passion, creativity, and sustained commitment to the truth.

rewards in satisfaction (compared to those who narrated academic continuation, approximately 85% of whom were satisfied or very satisfied) when they settled on an academic major.

What are some of the reasons that students provide for electing a distinctive academic direction in college? Concerning the positive reasons for *academic divergence*, some students described a high level of self-efficacy, reporting that they felt well prepared by their high schools or their families to try any number of new academic disciplines in college. Their high schools provided them with the foundation to excel in a wide array of disciplines, and their families supported their intellectual exploration. This response was most common among continuing generation students and first-generation students who attended highly resourced high schools. For instance, Zicam, a continuing generation participant who attended a progressive K-12 day school, responded to the question whether his high school experience impacted his college choices: "I don't think it did. I thought, 'I got in here, that means I'm qualified to take a course here.'…I came in brave." Likewise Emily, a first-generation student who attended a rigorous International Baccalaureate high school, responded: "I think I was pretty much geared towards what I did because of my own interests. I don't think [high school] really affected it too much."

Sometimes, like with Chris, an African American first-generation pre-med completing a rigorous biology major, the students who reported *academic divergence* explained that they refused to allow their high school experiences to dictate their college choices. Even though as a senior he reported feeling that his high school did not adequately prepare him for college, when asked whether this preparation impacted his college choices he replied: "No. I still challenged myself. If there was something I wanted to take, I would do it." Chris's academic pathway, like Erik's in the section above, was one he was forging without models from home.[63] As with Erik, he made deliberate choices about what and how to study, and like Erik, was very self-reflective about how his first-generation status impacted his academic pathway:

> I am guessing that this is a pretty obvious thing, but since my parents didn't go to college, it really made my going to college a really new experience. And although I handled it really well, it was new. I didn't have my parents to rely on, and they couldn't really relate to it. They could give me advice but they didn't have their past experience to rely on and they couldn't relate to specific things. I wouldn't say it negatively impacts the transition, but it changes the way you transition because you have to change the way you approach the transition (*excerpted from sophomore interview*).

As with Erik above, Chris's self-reflection on his own intellectual self-concept and how it related to his familial upbringing offered him a kind of mental clarity

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[63] This does not mean that Chris or Erik did not benefit from ongoing and supportive relationships with his parents that helped him gain the confidence to succeed in college. In fact, both students reported close relationships with their families that buoyed them during stressful moments in college. I will return to this difference between having academic models and social-emotional support at home in subsequent chapters.

regarding his academic choices that was not always verbally underscored by the

continuing generation students in our sample. His choice of *academic divergence*

may not have been because of his limited high school preparation, but rather

despite it.

Other students who described *academic divergence* saw college as an

opportunity to "wipe the slate clean" and re-define who they were and who they

intended to become in the new college context. First-generation Ironman

explained, "My mindset was 'clean slate.' I wanted to fit in with everyone."

Similarly, first-generation Sergio replied, "I didn't hold back." This response was

common among first-generation students pursuing a business major or

preparing for a career in finance, business management, or entrepreneurship. For

these students, it was imperative to learn the unwritten rules, both academic and

social, critical to securing a "return offer" on Wall Street or at a Fortune 500 firm.

Their high schools and home communities could not offer them models to plan

for their future employment, so they spoke of divergent pathways as risk taking

for employment rewards.[64]

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[64] See Lauren Rivera's crucial work (2012, 2015) on "cultural matching" between elite firms and prospective hires. Some of the first-generation students in this sample spoke of learning the "rules"—providing examples to the interviewer like how to network, how to present oneself in an interview or at a social gathering, how to dine, how to dress, etc.—in order to secure lucrative jobs directly out of college. Many of these students did not wish to stay in the finance profession for their entire careers, just long enough to "give back" to their families, and prospectively to ensure that the families they made (spouses, children) would "be solid."

Still others who described *academic divergence* were curious about

disciplines they had heard about but had not been exposed to in high school, like

political science or computer science, or that came as a complete surprise

stemming from unanticipated occurrences such as accidents of course scheduling

or impulse selections intended to fulfill general education requirements. This

final trajectory was most commonly narrated by first-generation and continuing

generation students in the smaller social sciences such as anthropology,

archeology, and linguistics, and interdisciplinary fields such as African American

studies or peace studies. Their responses dovetail with Chambliss and

Takacs' (2014) longitudinal findings that many college students select a major

based on whether they perceive fellow feeling with or respect the faculty in the

department of the initial course they take in that department, thereby "majoring

in a professor" rather than a discipline, so to speak.

It is important to note that first- and continuing generation students who

described *academic divergence* did so for a variety of reasons, as explored above.

However, first-generation students described *academic divergence* more frequently

because of a lack or gap in their high school experience, or because they had no

models from home to follow regarding their intended professional trajectories.

These were not common reasons offered by continuing generation students. And

for some first-generation students, the story of *academic divergence* began in

disappointment. That is, these first-generation students chose novel academic pathways in college because they felt that they were not equipped to study the same subject in college that they spent considerable time pursuing in high school. Or, they experienced early setbacks in college that compelled them to re-consider their original academic plans.

Here is an example to illustrate this point. Karina, a first-generation Latina who excelled in her math/science specialty high school and who was an enthusiastic math major during her sophomore interview, explained during her senior interview that, upon reflection she realized that she did not know how to "access the resources" she needed to succeed in the math program in college. She explained that, since she excelled in her math/science magnet program, she arrived in college assuming "That is what I am going to do." In fact, during her sophomore interview she spoke with great confidence about her math major, indicating at several points that she considered it a feature of her identity to be a "math person." But by her senior year, Karina had switched majors to religion in part because of a series of uncomfortable encounters with math faculty whom she felt acted unwelcoming toward her. She also began performing less well than she expected in her major courses and was unsure where to seek assistance. One adviser was on leave, and her interim adviser was on faculty in a different department. Having taken a religion course as part of a general education

requirement, she found herself becoming more intellectually committed to and

comfortable with the material and faculty in the religion department. The

academic inquiries the religion department allowed and supported, particularly

with regard to political advocacy, enabled Karina to integrate her extracurricular

and social commitments with her academic interests. She felt "at home" among

the students, faculty, and staff there. She reached an epiphany one day when she

found herself asking her religion professor for academic advice rather than

turning to her math adviser. At that moment, Karina decided to transfer majors.

While Karina expressed high satisfaction with her newly adopted major, she was

nonetheless disappointed with the process, and to some extent with the outcome.

Tears streamed down her face as she relayed:

> The hard part, though, is that I am really good at math, and when I
> would say I am a math concentrator, being a woman and a Latina,
> people would say "Wow!" And I got the impression people thought I
> must be really smart. Now when I say I am a religion major, people
> say, "Oh, and what are you planning to do with that?" They don't
> know that there is anything you can do vocationally with that
> concentration. And they don't think it's as difficult, because it's not as
> highly valued as a math concentration.

Even though Karina spoke glowingly about her new major, she had

difficulty re-framing her intellectual identity as "really smart" *and* a religion

concentrator. This may be because Karina assumed a hierarchy of value among

different academic fields—this popularly held belief is a perennial challenge for

administrators and faculty to dislodge (Roth, 2015; Nussbaum, 2010; Tobin,

2015), and one that may impact the intellectual self-concept of first-generation

students more than continuing generation students (Persky, 2012). In this sample,

no continuing generation participant narrated a similar experience to Karina's.

While some continuing generation students expressed disappointment at not

being able to study math, for instance, they were not surprised by their lack of

math preparation between high school and college and so did not discuss trying

and facing barriers to their desired academic pathway while in college.[65]

Moreover, very few continuing generation students narrated their academic

pathway as an alternate choice, or that they wished could do something else.

While *academic divergence* is not necessarily negative—in fact, multiple

examples from this sample suggest otherwise—institutional and informal steps

can be taken to mitigate the possibility that students select a distinct academic

pathway out of avoidable frustration with their original desired pathway. More

attentive advising, especially for low-income and minority students pursuing

STEM (Museus et al., 2011) or other majors viewed as traditionally "privileged"

is an important first step (Engle & Tinto, 2008). A pre-orientation program that

includes scaffolded support and instruction for students from lower resourced

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[65] Continuing generation MacNeill offers a good counterpoint to Karina's story. MacNeill considered himself a "math person" since early childhood and won math competitions as a young adolescent. But by the end of high school, MacNeill felt that his public school's opportunities had limited his growth in math. He avoided math in college, blaming his high school's lack of preparation, and lamented a lost opportunity to pursue one of his life's passions. McNeill's story of academic divergence echoes the disappointment that Karina expressed, but he accused his high school rather than early college experiences as the source of his disappointment.

high schools is also a potential solution (*See* Chapter 6). Finally, I would argue for ongoing communication and policies by the university to convey the message that taking academic risks, trying out new subjects, and altering one's academic trajectory are not failures but necessary features of the college-going process.[66] Ultimately, it is not whether a first-generation (or continuing generation) student elects *academic continuation* or *academic divergence* that makes a difference in how he or she assesses academic success; it is whether the student feels that he or she has a choice, and a sense of self-efficacy in that choice, when measuring satisfaction with a particular academic pathway.

Academic Satisfaction: A Look at Students' Self-Reported Scales

When comparing first- and continuing generation students by how they rank their academic experiences, it is difficult to identify a specific pattern of difference between the two groups. When asked to rank their academic experiences on a scale of 1-10, where "1" is terrible and "10" is outstanding, the

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[66] Andrew Delbanco, literary theorist and author of the grandly titled *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be* (2012), offers a humorous vignette of two fictional college students viewing the same production of *King Lear*. One concludes that the play is boring and that Lear "had it coming," while the other leaves the theater struck, almost heartbroken, and finds himself reflecting on his own relationship with his father and on the man he wishes to become. Delbanco argues that the point of the liberal arts is to spark deep and critical thinking, but that this happens in serendipitous and non-uniform ways, as when one student, upon engaging with a classic play, "gets it" and changes his life's trajectory while the other student does not. This second student may experience his moment of reckoning in some other course or experience, but the hope is that all college students, at some point during their time in college, will experience this moment of awakening and that it will endure to guide their life's future path.

median response for both first- and continuing generation students is "8," or generally high. The range for first-generation students is 4 - 10, with an interquartile range of 7 - 8.5. The range for continuing generation students is 3 - 10, with an interquartile range of 7.375 - 9. As shown in the box-and-whiskers plots below for senior responses, it appears that first-generation responses comprise a tighter range, with more frequent responses in the "7-8" range (as opposed to "8-9" for continuing generation seniors), but in general it does not appear that there is much of a difference in self-reported ratings of academic satisfaction between first- and continuing generation students.

Figure 8: First-Generation & Continuing Generation Academic Satisfaction Scales
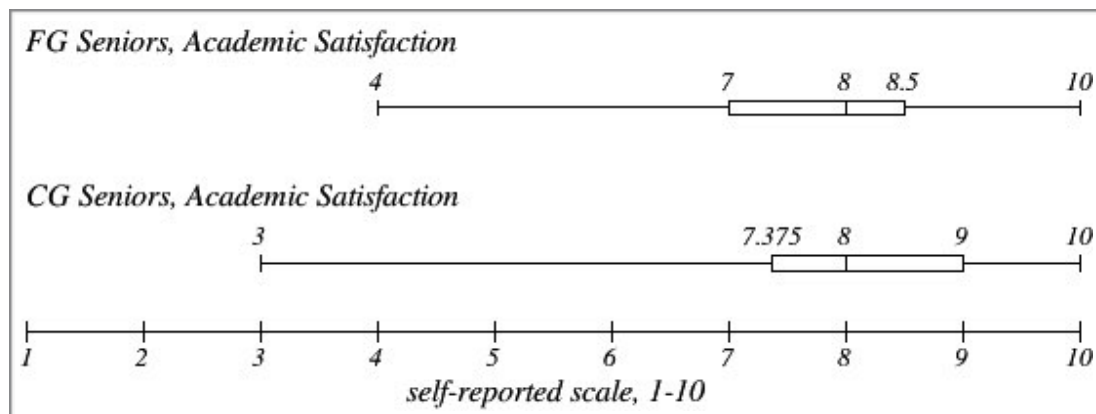
What if, instead of comparing first- and continuing generation students' academic satisfaction ratings, we compare sophomore-to-senior academic satisfaction? By reviewing original ratings and pairing them to senior responses, we may trace whether students' satisfaction increased over time, and whether

this pattern appeared more or less pronounced among first-generation students. In the two tables below, the dark grey circles signify individual students' sophomore rating. These are connected by a dark grey line to show the trend in sophomore responses from the lowest recorded rating to the highest. I then paired these students' sophomore rating with their senior rating, and plotted the correlating senior response on the graph with light grey circles and connecting lines. The light grey circles represent the senior's re-evaluated academic rating, which is directly above or below the sophomore rating on the x-axis. So, for instance, the second recorded first-generation response in the table above indicates that, as a sophomore this student rated his/her academic experience a "3," and as a senior he/she revised that rating to an "8." In this manner, we can quickly see whether a trend exists in equal reporting over time, improvement in satisfaction, or erosion of satisfaction between sophomore and senior year. I operationalize equal reporting as when seniors provide a rating within one point of their sophomore rating, and improvement or erosion as a minimum of a 1.5 point difference upward or downward.

For both our first- and continuing generation participants, senior academic satisfaction ratings were generally higher (and with a narrower inter-quartile range) than sophomore ratings. As a whole, compared to their continuing generation peers the first-generation participants expressed greater

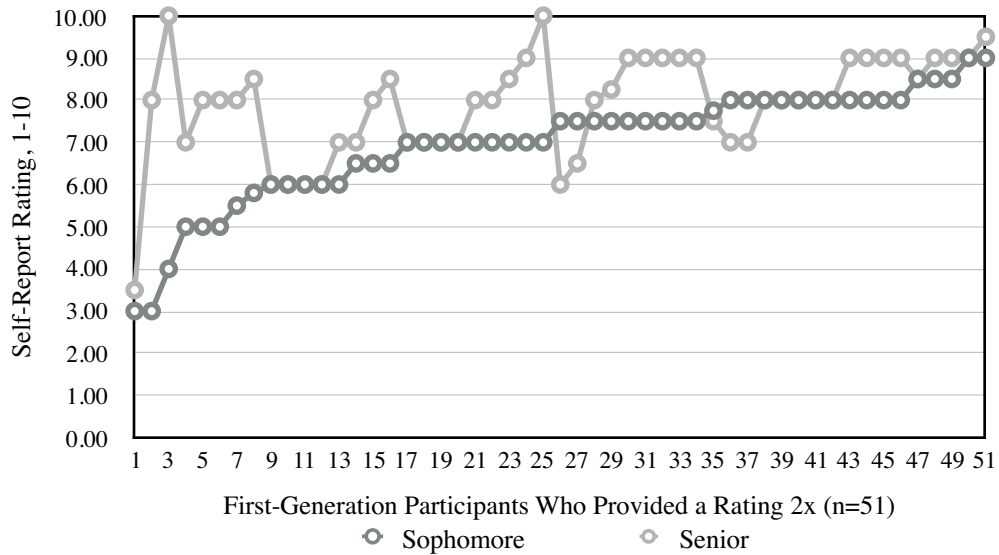### Figure 9: First-Generation Academic Satisfaction, Sophomore to Senior Year

Figure 9: First-Generation Academic Satisfaction, Sophomore to Senior Year

First-Generation Participants Who Provided a Rating 2x (n=51)

○ Sophomore   ○ Senior

Figure 10: Continuing Generation Academic Satisfaction, Sophomore to Senior Year

Figure 10: Continuing Generation Academic Satisfaction, Sophomore to Senior Year

Continuing Generation Participants Who Provided a Rating 2x (n=33)
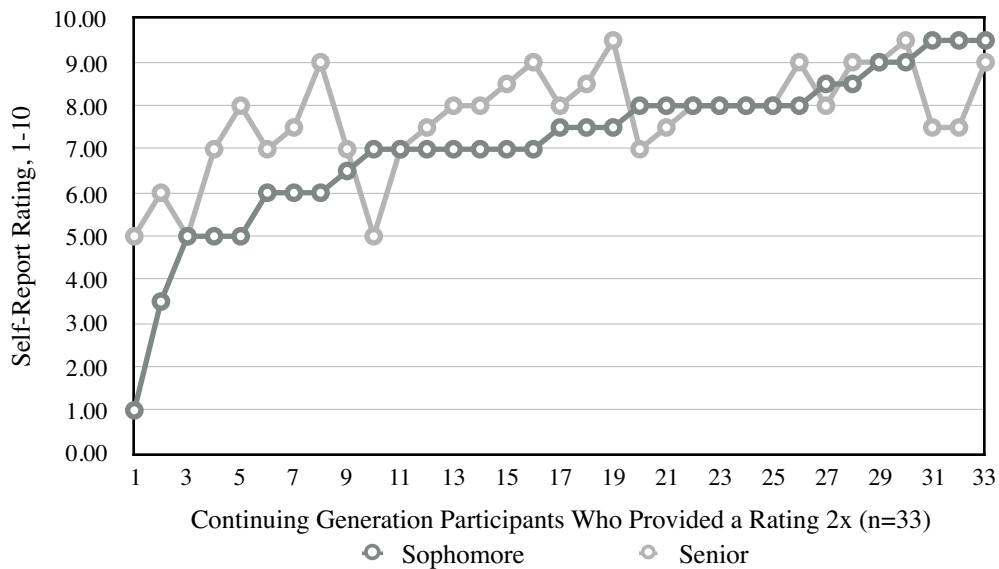
○ Sophomore   ○ Senior

gains in academic satisfaction between sophomore and senior year. This was

especially pronounced for those first-generation students who originally rated

their academic satisfaction a "7" or lower. 33% (n=17) of first-generation

participants and 27% (n=9) of continuing generation participants who rated their academic experiences twice revised their senior ratings upward by 1.5 points or higher. By contrast, only 2% (n=1) of first-generation and 9% (n=3) of continuing generation participants revised their academic satisfaction rating downward by 1.5 points or lower. Overall, however, most first- (65%, n= 33) and continuing generation (64%, n=21) participants reported similar academic satisfaction, or within one point on a 1-10 scale, between sophomore and senior year.

Differences in Academic Satisfaction at Georgetown and Harvard

When analyzing participants' responses to interview questions, I generally collapse the responses from Harvard and Georgetown participants into one sample. I do this for several reasons. First, it produces a larger sample by which to explore more generalizable trends than a focus on a single campus would be able to accomplish. Second, in general, first-generation students from both campuses describe their academic and social experiences on campus in a similar fashion. These are two elite, historically predominantly white campuses with long histories of efforts to improve access to underrepresented and overlooked strivers (originally in their local communities and catchment regions, and more recently throughout the nation and world), and imperfect but ever aspiring to make good on their commitments to diversity and inclusion as both a social

responsibility and a self-interested aim to maximize educational benefits for all students. Harvard and Georgetown's similarities are striking in this context, but they also speak to the concerns of many colleges and universities in the U.S. and so can be seen as potential models of practice more broadly. But there are also reasons to disaggregate the responses of Georgetown's and Harvard's first-generation students, and these reasons emerge when the participants from each campus diverge noticeably in their responses to similar interview questions. Understanding this divergence can help administrators and policymakers discern useful programmatic solutions based on precedent and an understanding of the context.

The case of academic satisfaction is one such instance where Georgetown and Harvard first-generation students diverged and understanding their differences may illuminate alternative pathways of supporting first-generation students more broadly. When asked to rate their academic experiences, Georgetown first-generation students generally reported lower initial satisfaction with their academic experiences as sophomores, but higher rates of satisfaction as seniors. The difference in their reporting between sophomore and senior year was starker than the difference for Harvard's first-generation participants. Harvard first-generation students reported steady satisfaction rates between sophomore and senior year, with only 18% (n=4) of first-generations participants

who were asked twice about their academic satisfaction offering a response of 1.5 or more different than their original assessment.[67] By contrast, a much higher percentage of Georgetown's first-generation seniors who provided academic ratings both as sophomores and seniors revised their academic satisfaction rating upward by 1.5 points or more (48%, n=14), and none reported a decline in academic satisfaction. All of these students were participants in the Georgetown Scholarship Program (GSP), and in their open ended responses they indicated that a combination of participation in GSP (and also often Community Scholars Program, an extended pre-college program offered to low-income students from lower resourced high schools) and cultivating relationships with faculty mentors in their academic departments enabled tremendous growth between sophomore and senior year. The role of programs like the GSP cannot be underestimated, even if, as with the GSP, they do not fashion themselves as academic support centers but as social, personal, and pre-professional support programs.

Georgetown first-generation participants who changed their rating of academic satisfaction (48%, n=14) often disclosed that they felt dissatisfied freshman and sophomore year because they felt underprepared, overwhelmed, and afraid to ask their professors for academic assistance in class and outside of

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[67]Three first-generation participants revised their rating of academic satisfaction upward, and one student revised it downward.

class.[68] But through ongoing program support offered by the GSP, peer role

models, and forging relationships with caring professors they grew more

confident and satisfied with their academic experiences over time.[69] Harvard

first-generation participants tended to report stable satisfaction rates over time,

and these rates were similar both to Georgetown first-generation seniors and

continuing generation seniors (M = 8, IQR = 7-8.5). Harvard first-generation

participants indicated that supportive "peer advising fellows" (a near-peer

mentorship model through the residence houses that pairs older students with

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[68] A subset of Georgetown's first-generation participants also participated in a five-week summer program, called Community Scholars Program, designed to prepare students from low-income and under-resourced high school backgrounds for the rigors of the Georgetown curriculum. The Georgetown students who participated in this program generally rated their academic experiences higher as sophomores than those who did not, and had similarly high rates of academic satisfaction as those seniors who did not participate in Community Scholars but were involved in GSP throughout college. This may be in large part due to the preparation that Community Scholars affords, specifically in encouraging students to seek assistance directly from their professors, practice going to office hours, and forming study groups. During the course of this longitudinal study, GSP also incentivized these practices, creating a scavenger hunt style activity that rewarded students for visiting office hours, seeking one-on-one support, and visiting the various tutoring and advising centers on campus, among other things.

[69] The director of GSP, Melissa Foy, explained that Georgetown faculty approached her to ask how they could better support first-generation students in their classes after an extensive awareness campaign, GSProud, was launched on campus. This campaign began in 2014 and continues as an outreach and celebration campaign for GSP students. The rationale for this campaign was partly grounded in early findings from this longitudinal study, particularly those articulated by Jennifer Nguyen in the first two years of this research. The GSProud campaign goal is to raise awareness of common issues that first-generation students face in college and to highlight their successes, both academic and professional. While some faculty at Georgetown were aware of and participated in the GSP since its inception in 2004, other faculty expressed new or renewed awareness and desire to support first-generation students as a result of campaigns like GSProud and the activities of GSP as a result of student input and the findings from this study (Melissa Foy, personal communication, January 15, 2016). Practices like this indicate that there is a mutual relationship between research studies such as this one, programming to support first-generation students, and students' changing satisfaction during the course of their participation in the research. It cannot be said, then that this is an "objective" or "natural" study of first-generation students, but rather an iterative, quality-enhancement informed research project.

younger students to support their transition to college), first year advisers, and peers and roommates (who often formed study groups or buddy systems to support healthy study habits) were the top three reasons for their high academic satisfaction ratings. Harvard's administrators make an express effort to pair first-generation students, especially those from lower-resourced high schools, with first year advisers and peer advising fellows who express an interest in or similar background to such students.[70] Likewise, they take special precautions when assigning roommates to maximize the potential for a supportive yet diverse residential environment.[71] When using academic satisfaction as an indicator of success, both Harvard's dispersed approach to ensuring a maximally nurturing environment for its first-generation students and Georgetown's centralized program dedicated to the success of its first-generation students appear to work well as models of support. Whereas Georgetown's first-generation seniors narrate a meteoric rise in academic satisfaction between sophomore and senior year, Harvard's first-generation seniors narrate a generally stable satisfaction over time. And by their senior year, both Georgetown and Harvard first-generation students report rates of academic satisfaction similar to their continuing generation peers.

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[70] Anya Bassett, personal communication, May 3, 2013

[71] Thomas Dingman, personal communication, September 28, 2015; also, Sue Brown, personal communication, September 30, 2015.

On Academic Successes & Challenges

During the senior year interview, we asked participants to identify and describe their greatest successes and challenges in terms of college academics. This question was designed to encourage students to reflect on aspects of their academic experiences that were most rewarding and most challenging for them —presumably, these would be the moments they would return to as alumni and as their college experiences become memories. "Success" was meant to be open-ended in its definition, as we were looking for authentic patterns of description, rather than soundbites or scripted responses. When students asked whether success meant "good grades," I responded, "interpret this question as success on your terms, your personal definition of success." Likewise with "challenges," students would often re-interpret the question as one eliciting "failures," but I would re-direct these students by saying, "not necessarily failures, but challenges —we want to know what you thought of as the most challenging aspects of your academic career here."

I wondered whether first-generation students described their academic successes and challenges—as they defined them—differently than continuing generation students. If so, these differences could predict differing relationships with their college over time, as first- and continuing generations students become young alumni and forge adult lives. Differences in evaluations of 'successes' and

'challenges' could also indicate differing interpretations of their academic pathway. As we have seen throughout this chapter, with a few exceptions the academic pathways of first- and continuing generation students are not in themselves so very different, but student evaluations of these pathways may be different. If differences exist, these findings may be incorporated into future programming and training of new faculty as universities seek to become more inclusive and more attentive to fostering successful (again, defined in various ways) and transformative experiences for all of their students.

Academic Successes

When speaking of their academic successes, first- and continuing generation students tended to offer similar narrative content, with a few notable exceptions. The most common responses among both groups included: forming meaningful relationships with faculty or experiencing a transformative moment in a particular class, success on specific assignments or in especially challenging courses, external indicators of success (GPA, academic awards and nominations), achieving integration of different interests into a coherent academic structure, and finding their passion. They also pointed to experiences known by education scholars as "high impact practices" (Kuh, 2008): studying abroad, conducting research or working in a laboratory with a faculty mentor, completing lengthy

independent research projects and writing analytical or creative papers of at least twenty pages. Both first- and continuing generation spoke of these experiences as transformative at similar rates, while first-generation students were more likely to frame these experiences as surprise outcomes of their educational trajectories. This was particularly true with study abroad. Many of the first-generation students in this sample did not anticipate studying abroad before college but, often through circuitous routes and after convincing wary parents of its value, it became one of the highlights of their college experience. It often led to a deepened commitment toward a major or academic path, reduced stress upon return to campus after a semester, summer, or year abroad, and an expansion of the sense of possibilities for their future careers and how they wished to balance their personal and professional lives.

The few differences in their descriptions of academic success revolved around first-generation students overcoming initial intimidation by the academic process. For instance, first-generation Salvi counted one of his successes as "proving to myself that I'm not dumb." Very few continuing generation students spoke of feeling intimidated by their professors (occasionally they spoke dismissively of professors, but never did they speak as though they were afraid of them) or the academic process, while this was a theme among at least one-third of first-generation students, most of whom came from lower resourced high

schools with fewer opportunities for pre-college research. Even those who attended well resourced high schools, like Henry, explained that it was a challenge to learn to speak up in class and to overcome fears of sounding less intelligent than peers. As Henry explained, "Talking in class is challenging. It's very scary and a lot of how you are perceived in courses effects your overall grades. You have to participate and I feel intimidated to do so."

Generally speaking, however, first- and continuing generation students alike pointed to moments when they achieved clarity or integration, completed a challenging assignment, or developed capabilities they did not have prior to college as their greatest successes in college. But while the content of first- and continuing generation student descriptions of their academic successes were often similar, the overall tone appeared different. This was in large part because of the proportion of first-generation students who attended lower resourced high schools in comparison to the proportion of continuing generation students from similar high school backgrounds. First-generation students described their academic successes in terms that underscored their fears of failure as much as their pride in success. This difference may be due to the practice of performed success that sociologists like Shamus Khan (2011) underscore with students from elite schools: continuing generation students' practice of achievement may be conducted in the context of 'ease,' or the confidence in their ability to succeed

rather than in the context of striving or struggle. Again, this may be a school-based finding rather than one of first- versus continuing generation students, as those continuing generation students from lower resourced backgrounds spoke in these terms and first-generation students from elite school backgrounds were less likely to frame their experiences in this manner. But the general tone of the two groups—first-generation and continuing generation—may be best described as contrastive despite similar content. The narratives offered by two students, Agnes and Emily, both "A" students considering futures in graduate school, underscore this point.

When asked what she was most proud of accomplishing in college, Agnes, a first-generation senior, responded: "Finding my own niche within the academic world, finding my academic passion and not conforming to a pattern." She described her greatest academic success as also her greatest challenge:

> Every semester is a challenge. But I think I really enjoyed my junior year, because I did really well and took challenging courses. I took a human development course, and I learned so much from it. I still talk to my professor from my human development course, and he was genuinely interested in me and my success as a student. He said to me, "Agnes, your ideas are phenomenal, it's just the way you present them that needs work." This course proved to be my greatest challenge but also the greatest success. My professor pointed out that I made a transformative improvement from the first paper to the final, and that recognition, and that it's going to take a lot of work… it's not just about the grade, but the way I approach material, my future career, and how I live my life, that really changed me.

Agnes worked indefatigably in this course and in her other courses. As she explained, it was emotionally taxing for her because she wanted to do well in her courses but she also desired the opportunity to fully engage with the material without fear of performing poorly. She desired a deep engagement with the material, but she worried that she could not make the leap expected of her in terms of her writing abilities. The refrain, "*Am I good enough*?" repeated noxiously in her mind. Agnes offered me her backstory to put in context her current concerns. She and her mother had arrived in the United States from Mexico when she was in elementary school. They spoke little English, and most of her public schooling thenceforth revolved around Agnes learning to read, write, and speak English fluently. Her mother, who did not speak English at first, could not help her with the technical aspects of her American schooling, although she provided something else essential: unflagging emotional support, encouragement, and a safe haven to which Agnes could return when her academic challenges grew overwhelming.[72] Agnes performed in the highest percentiles on her state's standardized exams and graduated at the top of her high school class, but was dogged by fears that she lagged behind her peers because of the content loss (history, science, math) due to the time taken over by

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[72] Agnes's mother's support for her academics continued into college, as Agnes and her mother spoke daily on the phone. Her mother served as an emotional harbor enabling her to take risks, to offer someone to complain to when her assignments were too challenging, and to serve as a backboard to listen and offer encouragement.

learning English. As Agnes described her background and experiences in college,

it was obvious that this was a passionate, articulate, goal-oriented young woman.

But it took several years in college for her to gain the confidence she needed to

fully embrace her academic pathway:

> My freshman year I was intimidated by the academic process…I was afraid to go to office hours. Now I go in to talk about all sorts of things, their work, how much I enjoyed the lecture, specific questions I had about the readings. At first I was intimidated by these formidable figures with PhDs. In my family the maximum level of education was high school. So I felt I was getting intimidated by the difference between the reality I grew up with and the reality that I was meeting. And going from that intimidated and cautious and trembling all the time person to become less intimidated with a person with a PhD and filled with courage, that was the major change. For me to know more about the world and dialogue with the world, that was a change.

Let us compare Agnes with another passionate, articulate, goal-driven

young woman: Emily, a continuing generation senior whose parents were not

only college graduates but whose father and older sister were alumni at the

college where she was enrolled. Emily had attended a well resourced, project-

based public high school. Before high school, she attended a Spanish immersion

public school and spent much of her instructional time mastering specific

language skills related to learning academic content in one's non-native

language. Emily arrived in college concerned that because of her alternative

schooling experiences she may not have the tools to excel in certain aspects of

college: specifically, she suffered from test anxiety and was afraid she would

perform poorly in large lecture-format courses. When asked how well she felt her high school prepared her for college, she confessed that she felt 'less prepared' than her peers, explaining that her math and science preparation were lower than she had hoped, and that she arrived in college less "intellectually curious" than she was by the end of freshman year. But like Agnes, by the time we sat down together for a second time during her senior year, Emily had found that she grew immensely during her four years of college. When asked about her greatest academic successes, Emily responded:

> Junior year for me was really transformational from an academic and intellectual perspective. I did the junior tutorial in both the fall and spring, and in both semesters I was told that I turned in the strongest 35-page research paper of my peers. And that meant so much. I'd been told that in other classes, but that meant even more to me because it was among social studies peers. I think social studies attracts the most interesting and intelligent people in the social sciences, and for me that meant even more because I was so impressed with the people around me. Also I developed a personal relationship with the professor... I've been good at developing personal relationships with faculty. It's typical, you don't know how to navigate that when you first get here. Being able to engage with faculty on a personal level, to be able to talk about what they're working on and not just what you're working on is really unique.

In many respects, Emily's concerns about her academic preparation mirrored Agnes's, despite their disparate backgrounds. One difference between the two, however, was that Emily could reach out to her parents and older sister when she needed academic advice, whereas Agnes felt as though she was on her own in learning to navigate college. Agnes sought the assistance she needed from her

peers, her professors, and the Georgetown Scholars Program, of which she was a member. Both Agnes and Emily described initial fear of approaching professors, but there is a subtle and significant difference in the tone of Emily's narrative. Both students use the word "transformation" in their narrative, but Agnes's narrative underscores the path from "intimidation" to "courage" as a core feature of her transformation (indeed, the word "intimidated" came up no less than five times in that one paragraph), whereas Emily describes becoming the best at something and feeling both humbled and inspired by this experience in the context of such excellent peers and faculty.[73] The story of success — and the "A's" that attended them—may be similar in content, but their tone is distinctive.

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[73] Again, this distinction mirrors Khan's (2011) finding among elite high school students: those who embody "ease" do so as a way to instantiate their success as a form of meritocracy, while those who describe or enact a struggle to achieve (sometimes the scholarship students in Khan's ethnography) are not doing it "right" according to their peers.

One may be regarded as the *academic turnaround*, and the other as *ongoing academic achievement*.[74]

First-generation students, especially those from lower resourced backgrounds, were more likely to speak about overcoming challenging beginnings, learning how to achieve academic success over time, and coming around to believing in their own desert. The *academic turnaround* was a key theme as they reflected on the arc of college. Many specifically spoke of beginning with "D's" or "F's" on a course and ending with an "A." First-generation Marie, for instance, explained that her biggest success was "British poetry class freshman

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[74] This way of articulating the difference between first- and continuing generation students is echoed in the informal analysis of university administrators. In informal conversation, it is often assumed that students from lower-performing high schools may take time to "catch up" with their peers from better resourced high schools, but that their academic transformation will be secured through their course of college. One senior university administrator was said to have told the following story to his colleagues as his rationale for supporting the recruitment and ongoing support of first-generation students: *Say you are a baseball recruiter and you attend a high school pick-up game. One player has somewhat poor form but hits the ball hard. His arms may flail as he runs around the bases, but he gets to home plate and scores for his team. Another player has perfect form, hits a home run, and confidently glides over the bases to home. Which player are you going to recruit?* In this scenario, you pick the less polished player, assuming that with a little guidance he will perform even better than his well-trained peers. In reality, college admissions officers are concerned with a host of concerns, among them creating a balanced class that includes full-paying students from well-heeled backgrounds as well as promising strivers (Stevens, 2007; Steinberg, 2002; Duffy & Goldberg, 1998). Also, this scenario assumes two young men of unidentified ethnicity are vying for the same academic slot, while in practice admissions officers must balance gender, race, ethnicity, and geographical representation in their classes without adhering to illegal quotas or questionable recruitment techniques. And as higher education scholars have pointed out multiple times (Hoxby & Avery, 2012; Hoxby & Turner, 2015; Radford, 2013), students from low-income backgrounds, often attending lower-resourced high schools, do not even consider applying to elite colleges. For those that do and who ultimately enroll, the difference in experiences between those low-income students who attended elite high schools on scholarship and those who enter college without prior exposure to elite educational settings is stark (Jack, 2014, 2015). Clearly, what we might call "academic turnaround" or, as is described by Stuber (2011) and Rondini (2010) as "catching up," is a complex set of processes begun long before college despite its continued usefulness as a simple distinction between those who enter college prepared and those who do not.

year. First assignment I got a D and it was terrifying and I ended up finishing out the class with an A-. I was pretty proud of that freshman year." Similarly, first-generation Stephanie said:

> The most tangible success is my success in one professional class with X Professor. He is phenomenal. I took a writing class with him because I needed to make my writing better. Our initial assessment, it would have been a D for that paper, and each paper kept getting better until I needed up getting an A in his class. I was one of the few to manage to get an A. My dean told me that. That was the most tangible success, when I felt like I could keep my head above water.

Some did not apply the *academic turnaround* theme to a single course but holistically to their approach to coursework in college. For instance, Salvi, offered this assessment:

> Sophomore slump was super real for me. I had to choose a major, figure out what I'm trying to do here. There was a lot of pressure because I didn't understand myself enough and what I wanted outside of college. My entire life was spent on figuring out how to get to college. College was the final goal. So I didn't see myself beyond college. I come from a low-income community, one where not a lot of people to to college. And it was like, "I did it, but now what?" I was very lost and didn't know what to do with myself…

> I read this book, *How to Get A's in College.* I found it surfing the Internet. I literally Googled how to do better in college, and this book came up. So I got the book. And implementing these strategies, it began working. And then realizing this wasn't so hard. But you know what? Maybe if someone told me what I needed to do in order to succeed in college, I wouldn't have done it. I needed to go through the experience of sucking — develop moral fiber, character, whatever— and then decide I wanted to do better for myself, and looking for a solution.

Salvi realized that he "needed to get [his] mindset right" in order to tackle his coursework and define his vocational pathway. At first he did not put enough time into his coursework, skipped classes, and turned assignments in late. He explained that he did so out of a lost sense of direction. But peers, especially his roommates and friends in two all-male ethnic social groups (one a Latino fraternity, the other an African American men's association), encouraged him to work harder, put in longer hours studying, and adapt his habits to prove his potential. "When I came here I felt like I wasn't smart enough … but then I realized you don't get through stuff like that by thinking it away. You need to put yourself into action. Once I put myself into action I realized, 'Oh, this isn't so hard. I can do this.'" A how-to manual discovered on the Internet, coupled with supportive friends and Salvi's renewed motivation to succeed, helped him to turn around from a struggling first and second year student to a mostly "A" student whose academic adviser "was begging me to write [a thesis]." Echoing psychologist Carol Dweck's (2006, 2015) decades of research on fixed versus growth mindsets, Salvi framed his problem as one of switching from a fixed mindset—thinking he was not smart enough—to a growth one—taking action to learn new techniques for success. This led him to an *academic turnaround* and renewed confidence both in his merit and his capabilities.

Whereas Salvi and other first-generation students adroitly narrated the *academic turnaround*, often accomplished by an enormous amount of work and the will to succeed, most continuing generation students told their stories of academic success as *ongoing academic achievement*. No significant turnaround to create a a dramatic arc, and often no single achievement in particular, was offered as a compelling story of academic success. Instead, many continuing generation students made general statements about academic integration or reminisced briefly on a particular course without underscoring the effort it took to succeed. They sometimes spoke of academic outcomes in the form of grades as less important than deep learning, pre-professional planning, or developing a robust extracurricular resume. Whether they indicated that they cared about their grades or not, continuing generation students were less likely to narrate their academic successes in the context of turmoil and more like an extension of prior experiences. Continuing generation Lawrence's description provides a typical example:

> There haven't been courses where I walked out and thought 'Wow, I completely nailed that course.' I've insisted on taking five courses every semester, and I've been very busy. I didn't make too many solid "A's" but I kept busy and these were really interesting courses. It's less important to me now to get perfect grades than to have the opportunity to take as many courses as I want to. It still stings when I see a 3.6 on my overall GPA, but it's less important to me now. Just being able to be where I am now, being able to take these grad level courses, especially taking a lot more physics and a lot *harder* physics, more than I needed to, that's been reward enough.

Some continuing generation students spoke of initial doubt and subsequent proving to themselves that they were capable of the work expected of them. This way of talking about their academic success was more aligned with first-generation responses than it was with the modal response of their continuing generation peers. For instance, continuing generation senior Raphael said of his biggest success: "To give myself the chance to try a lot of things and to work through a lot of potential passions to come through the other side with a solid set of goals and the feeling that I'm moving on the path towards them." But his success was limned with a nagging concern regarding belonging, much like many first-generation students:

> The biggest [challenge] has been self-doubt and the things that come with that, like procrastination, poor time management, and adjusting from the feeling of being natural at everything to the feeling of reaching your limits and really start working hard and pushing through things that are less comfortable to sustain yourself academically.

Raphael, who attended a well resourced high school and had parents who were college graduates, echoed many of the concerns that his first-generation peer Salvi raised. Despite pre-college advantages, he still felt as though he had been too slow to seek help, especially in terms of academic and mental health assistance. As with Salvi, Raphael explained that it took time to realize he should seek help:

> I've more recently begun visiting [an academic counseling center on campus] for more general counseling that also pertains to academic stuff as well. I know I would have benefitted from receiving this kind of counseling sooner. There were definitely times when I could have sought help instead of burying myself in frustration alone. Academic trouble began sophomore year. I went to office hours and it helped somewhat; it was better than nothing for sure. This might be relevant, relating to the whole 'did high school prepare you for things' [question]: I wasn't prepared to be bad at something. I definitely had times when I had to work hard to turn things around and I did, but I didn't feel ready to do it in college. But it might be my own hang-ups than my own lack of training.

Raphael's concerns, especially regarding de-stigmatizing mental health issues as they related to academic and social pressure, were shared by first- and continuing generation students alike. For example, J.B., who earlier in this chapter explained that his high school did an excellent job at preparing him for college (and, incidentally, who had Ivy-educated parents who were available to help him navigate academic life), emphatically advised that the university lower academic the pressure to succeed for entering freshmen by reducing the course load to three courses or two pass-fail out of four, "because damn if people aren't ready for it!" J.B. and other students in the overall sample advocated for improved mental health services, and underscored that the convergence of academics and mental health is something that affects students regardless of their parental background. And, given the culture of "success" on elite campuses, this issue is too little attended to on such campuses at present. For continuing generation students like Raphael, they blame themselves for their own "hang-

ups"; for first-generation students like Salvi, they blame their lack of preparation. Either way, the fear of failure fosters unhealthy academic habits: procrastination, poor time management, failure to concentrate on an assignments. Finding a way to reduce academic stress in the first two years of college would benefit first- and continuing generation students alike.

Academic Challenges

Often, first- and continuing generation students in our sample described their greatest academic challenges in the context of their successes: mastering challenging course material, academic turnaround, learning how they learn best and applying these findings to their daily practices. Also, many students identified specific challenges related to academic habits: time management, seeking academic assistance early and often, going directly to the professor with a question rather than an indirect route, or learning to speak up in class. But there were also specific challenges that first-generation students discussed that did not arise in the continuing generation sample. These were either directly related to their experiences of being first in their family to attend college, or they were compounded by their status as low-income and/or underrepresented minorities in traditionally predominantly white universities. These challenges unearth possible gaps in institutional programming and support or opportunities

for community development above and beyond the more common challenges of

adjusting to college.

First-generation Erik spoke about the disconnect he experienced between

himself and the faculty his department. He argued, "the lack of professors that

'get it' makes everything a little more difficult." When asked to explain, he said:

> There is definitely a lack of diversity in academia here. Even with
> professors of color, there's still this sort of roadblock to get to them. It's
> the same thing as with any professor. What do I talk to them about?
> They're not from the same background as I am. A third generation
> immigrant is not the same as me, maybe he doesn't really know what
> I'm talking about when I talk about my immigrant status. Maybe he's
> never had to deal with the problems I have dealing with immigration.
> There aren't a lot of professors here who have dealt with poverty or
> who came from rural backgrounds as I have.

Erik had difficulty connecting with faculty when he arrived on campus, and this

was something that affected his overall experiences in college. If he had found a

mentor early, an adult in his department who shared his experiences, he might

have been more satisfied with his overall academic experiences.

While Erik faced challenges making connections to faculty, Ariana

struggled with stereotype threat and a fear of seeking assistance in the classroom.

Ariana described the corrosive effects of self-doubt coupled with peers'

ignorance of and insensitivity toward her background.

> My first two years, I struggled a lot in my classes mostly because I
> didn't speak up, or try to talk to my [teaching assistant] or professor.
> Especially freshman year. I was used to in high school, you only asked
> if you needed help and if you needed help then you weren't good

enough, strong enough. During the first midterm season, I got two "Ds" in a row. I remember sitting in the dining hall with my friend, and he noticed I was upset. And I started crying, telling him, "I shouldn't be here. I don't belong here. I'm not good enough." There are various reasons for why that happened. Later on, you realize that everyone goes through that. But the degree to which it affects someone depends on these variables. I went through my first year, thinking "why am I here?" But I also felt like I couldn't complain.

Even fall semester my sophomore year, I struggled through that as well. I remember taking a [general education course]. It was a class on the intersections of race, gender, and class. My peers' perspectives on my identity were shocking.They were theorizing a lot of experiences that they don't know about. I know they won't say those things to a person, but it's easy to say when they're theoretical. Here's an example: we were talking about the education of low-income families of color. And students in the classroom were blaming parents or teachers for students' failure. They said things like, "the parents don't care," or "the teachers are apathetic." That couldn't be farther from the truth. And they refused to consider any institutional or structural reasons why students from low-income minority communities weren't succeeding. It was shocking.

Ariana's example highlights that talking about race, class, and gender in class is a potentially fraught and volatile exercise, especially when some students speak from a position of authority on conditions that they are personally foreign to them (Novais & Warikoo, 2014). For Ariana, the experiences in this class exacerbated her feelings of inadequacy. Only when she found mentors in her residence hall and in her science major during her junior year was she able to re-claim her sense of belonging and gain the confidence she lost in her first two years of college. Junior year was the year of her academic turnaround, and like many other first-generation students, a combination of study abroad (when

possible), finding an academic home, and building connections with peers and mentors helped Ariana re-frame her experiences from struggling in a perceived hostile environment to thriving and envisioning a successful future.

Ariana and Erik both pointed to their sophomore year as the nadir in their college experiences (as did Raphael above). They were not alone. At least half of the first-generation students in our sample, and roughly one-quarter of the continuing generation students, identified sophomore year as a particularly challenging year for academic and personal integration. Many alluded to the so-called "sophomore slump" indicating that committing to a major but not yet feeling at home in their chosen department, coupled with the lack of attention by university administrators and the sometimes challenging aspects of moving into new residential settings with different roommates from freshman year all created the conditions for low satisfaction with sophomore year.

University administrators have long understood the value of intentional diversity programming and transitional support for all students during freshman year, but ongoing programming and support has not until recently been institutionalized for sophomores. At Georgetown University, the Georgetown Scholarship Program launched an event entitled Sophomore Strong Summit based on the findings of this study and recommendations from first-generation undergraduates in their program. This event was heavily attended by

Georgetown's first-generation students, and while this study did not assess its impact, it is hoped that offerings like this would alleviate at least some of the challenges that sophomores face as they transition into their departmental majors and more advanced courses alongside the social challenges of taking on extracurricular responsibilities and new residential configurations. At the very least, such events signal that the university cares and is listening to the concerns of their students; while it may not be perfect, each attempt is an improvement and an opportunity for dialogue between students and staff as they seek to forge the optimal conditions for academic thriving and social belonging on campus.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter I explored how the first- and continuing generation students in our sample talk about their academic experiences in college. The students in this sample are generally very highly motivated and accustomed to success, as they were often valedictorians, salutatorians, and top performers in their high schools. For both the first- and continuing generation students, their high school preparation impacted their college academic pathways. Given that more first-generation than continuing generation students attended lower resourced high schools, more first-generation than continuing generation

participants discussed feeling limited in college by their high school experiences.

Through dint of their own motivation and effort, many of these first-generation

participants described an academic turnaround from a nadir, usually sophomore

year, to greater confidence and pride in their successes by early senior year. But

how can elite colleges and universities do more to support first-generation

success earlier in their college experience? Below are a few recommendations

based on this chapter's findings:

Early Intervention. For many of the first-generation participants, the first

semester in college was their first exposure to a staggering variety of course

options and potential career paths. They were unprepared for the volume of

possibilities afforded them by their elite college. If highly selective colleges and

universities, from small private colleges to large public flagships, want to ease

the entry to college, then an important first step is to spend more time visiting

high schools or having high school students visit these colleges. Representatives

from such colleges could spend time not only recruiting promising candidates,

but explaining the wide variety of career pathways available. And students could

familiarize themselves with college campuses, classrooms, and syllabi long

before they matriculate. Independent or government-sponsored programs such

as the U.S. Department of Education's GEAR UP and TRIO early intervention

programs afford low-income students these types of opportunities. Such

programs could be expanded into regions that currently do not receive such support, and could widen their target population to include first-generation students regardless of parental income. Likewise, colleges across the U.S., Harvard and Georgetown included, already sponsor programs designed to foster relationships with schools in their region, inviting middle and high school students to tour the campus, take part in a lecture or debate, or view a performance. Such relationships could be deepened, for instance, by offering repeated visits for the same students over a course of several years. Or they could be widened to include all schools in a district rather than a select handful of schools that already benefit from relationships with the university. Many programs already exist for early intervention and exposure to the opportunities and expectations of college; this study suggests that their expansion would benefit those students who had little prior exposure to college in their home communities.

Pre-orientation. Short, socially-focused pre-orientation programs exist at Georgetown and Harvard, as well as many other schools across the United States. They offer a chance to forge relationships and acclimate to campus life in the week prior to orientation. At Georgetown, there are both short pre-orientations designed to provide students with a crash-course in academic habits useful for college (time management, speed reading, library research, etc.) and a

longer (5-week) program dedicated to supporting low-income students from

lower resourced high schools who might need additional tools and social

networks to thrive in college. Both of these programs were highly regarded by

Georgetown's first-generation participants, and approximately half of Harvard

participants requested similar programs. While Harvard did sponsor a summer

program for such students approximately a decade ago, it scuttled the program

due to fears that such a program would stigmatize its participants.[75] Evidence

from Georgetown suggests that while there is a risk that such students might

associate with each other at the expense of meeting a variety of peers from

different social and ethnic backgrounds, the participants in this program do not

feel stigmatized by their association with it. Indeed, they express a great deal of

pride in the community forged by their participation. Careful attention to

student needs, ongoing messages that they are equally capable of success given

some extra support, and providing evidence of alumni achievement (as well as

opportunities to meet with successful alumni) send the message that affiliation

with academically supportive pre-orientations is not stigmatizing. Finally, a

number of highly motivated, top-performing first-generation students at

Georgetown also requested a pre-orientation program to expose them to

laboratory science, internship opportunities, or research avenues. If such

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[75] Thomas Dingman, personal communication, September 28, 2015.

voluntary academically focused pre-orientation programs were expanded to

include top performers as well, then not only would more students be served but

a wider variety of students would participate, thus mitigating risk of stigma.

Ongoing Pro-Academic Co-Curricular Programming. Many first-generation

participants requested more pro-academic social programming throughout the

first two years, especially sophomore year. By pro-academic I mean workshops in

how to speak effectively in class, incentives for visiting office hours,

opportunities to engage one-on-one with faculty in low-risk settings, time

management tips, and multiple opportunities to reduce stress, express

vulnerability, and remind students that it is both normal and okay, even

instructive, to fail at challenging tasks. Such programs already feature in many

college and university calendars, and reiteration of their value demonstrated by

continued investment in quality programming of this sort is essential.[76]

Georgetown's GSP members reported enjoying competing in a scavenger hunt

style challenge to complete pro-academic tasks (visit a professor's office hours,

attend an academic services workshop, etc) for incentives such as coffee gift

cards and tickets to sporting events. Even short informational sessions that

expose students to stories of struggle and ultimate success, alongside discussions

of how socio-economic status, race, and ethnicity factor into how students

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[76] Harvard's Winter Session programming supportive of student success and transformation, such as the off-campus *Refresh Retreat,* are good examples.

experience college, provide powerful opportunities for students to narrate their experiences and take control of their academic destinies. Nicole Stephens and her colleagues at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management (2015, 2014) offer exceptional examples of short, low-cost interventions that bolster first-generation students' "school-relevant selves" and are associated with higher academic achievement post-intervention. Carol Dweck's (2006) research on fixed versus growth mindsets and demonstrating to students how to assess their current learning strategies and pinpoint new ones when their original ones fail are also relevant to helping first-generation students regain trust in their academic capabilities after early setbacks.

High Impact Practices. Overwhelming evidence suggests that "high impact practices" (Kuh, 2010, 2011) such as study abroad, internships, laboratory and independent research all offer the potential for transformative experiences in college. (AACU, n.d.; Kuh et al., 2015) However, first-generation students tend to participate in such practices at lower rates than continuing generation students. Discovering the specific barriers to entry that first-generation students face, and devising solutions to attenuate or eliminate these barriers would help level the academic playing field for first-generation students. Georgetown's GSP has been able to secure funding to offer up to eight stipends for first-generation students to take on unpaid summer internships, and some departments and academic

programs also offer stipends for such work. Such funding could be expanded to increase the number of first-generation students who benefit. Study abroad is generally covered by the student's tuition, but parents of first-generation students are often wary of sending their children abroad. Outreach to parents explaining the value and impact of study abroad on a student's trajectory could be a low-cost and effective solution. And laboratory work is theoretically available to all willing and capable students regardless of parental educational background. Nonetheless, psychological and practical (usually having to do with the need for paid work) barriers persist. If specific pre-orientation or term-time programs were established to introduce first-generation and low-income students to laboratory opportunities, then hopefully first-generation students would be more inclined to consider, apply to, and self-advocate for such opportunities as they progress through college.

Opportunities to Explore Earlier, Select a Major Later. A higher proportion of first-generation participants than continuing generation participants either selected a major they did not originally intend or switched their major between sophomore and senior year. Some of these students narrated the switch in purely positive terms, but many others expressed disappointment or frustration with their early academic experiences in college. Their narratives also underscore that choosing *academic continuation* or *academic divergence* from their high school

studies does not matter as much as feeling capable of making a free choice about

the direction of academic pursuits. Providing students with ample opportunities

to meaningfully explore, and to have the option to select a major later than their

sophomore year may reduce their anxiety about choosing the "right" major when

they are still undecided. Freshman seminars, which are often taken pass/fail, are

examples of lower-risk opportunities to explore new academic interests. Team-

taught introductions to academic fields are also useful, but they are less readily

available at present. Considering mandating that at least one course be taken

pass/fail freshman year and tweaking the timeline for major selection are other

possibilities.

Fix The Pipeline. This is an argument being made among student activists,

scholars, writers, research institutes, and among political and community leaders

across the United States at present. Countless sophisticated arguments have been

made regarding increasing opportunities for low-income and minority

undergraduates to gain access to highly regarded pre-professional pathways, as

well as increasing the number of faculty and staff at universities to serve as

mentors and models for such undergraduates. One goal is to ultimately increase

the number of minority and low-income students who pursue advanced degrees

—PhDs, JDs, MDs, MBAs, etc—and are then hired in these professions. This

study concurs with the larger body of literature arguing for increased

representation of minority, low-income, and first-generation professionals on faculty and staff at elite universities, as well as opportunities for these faculty and staff to share their stories to undergraduates both formally and informally. As first-generation students in this sample indicated, they desire more faculty who "get it," to whom they can relate, and by whom they feel validated and supported. These faculty do not have to be first-generation themselves, but should understand the challenges that first-generation students face and be committed to their ongoing achievement. Academic and career advisers who were themselves first-generation or who have a long-standing history supporting such students would also benefit undergraduates through their modeling and their support. Finally, ongoing training of current faculty in the kinds of obstacles that first-generation students face in their classrooms and beyond would allow well meaning but often unaware faculty to improve their teaching and how they relate to all of their students.

Chapter 5: On Social Experiences

Introduction

It is often assumed that first-generation students do not possess the social or cultural capital to unlock the doors of privilege at elite universities. Is there evidence from this study to indicate whether first-generation participants as a whole experience their social lives differently than continuing generation participants? If there are differences, what are the salient features of the differential social pathways traversed by each group?

In this chapter, I examine how first- and continuing generation participants discuss their social experiences in college. I explore how they rate their social experiences, narrate their greatest successes and challenges to social life, and reflect on the impact that their elite college education has had on their personal and social identity. I found that first-generation participants spoke of their social successes in college in similar ways to their continuing generation peers. However, their challenges were distinct from continuing generation participants, and the recommendations for improving social life on campus also differed. First-generation participants also chose from at least three distinct models for interacting with their college peers: *bulwarking* (where they chose to associate with others like themselves in order to fortify their social identity on a

predominantly white and wealthy campus); *pride work* (where they adopted the

first-generation identity and served as ambassadors to the larger campus); and

assimilation (where they adopted the behaviors and tastes of peers they assumed

were wealthier and had professional connections). Administrators and campus

leaders who seek to support first-generation students' social integration into the

college should be aware that first-generation students may opt for one or several

of these models along their course of college, and social programming should

allow students to elect the social identity they find most salient at any given time.

As with other identities, first-generation student identity appears flexible, fluid,

and context-dependent. Our participants' social satisfaction was associated with

how well they perceived their desired social identity to be accommodated by the

university.

Social Satisfaction: A Look at Students' Self-Reported Scales

When the interviewers asked the senior participants to rate their overall

social experience in college on a scale of 1-10 (where "10" is "terrific" and "1" is

"truly disappointing"), first-and continuing generation students responded with

similar ratings. First-generation seniors provided a mean response of 7.8 (out of

10), with a median of 8 and a range from 2 - 10. Continuing generation seniors

responded with a mean of 7.6, a median of 8, and a range of 3 - 10. In general, by

senior year both first- and continuing generation students were fairly satisfied with their overall social experiences on campus, and no clear difference emerged in terms of overall satisfaction with their social life in college.

Figure 11: First-Generation & Continuing Generation Social Satisfaction Scales
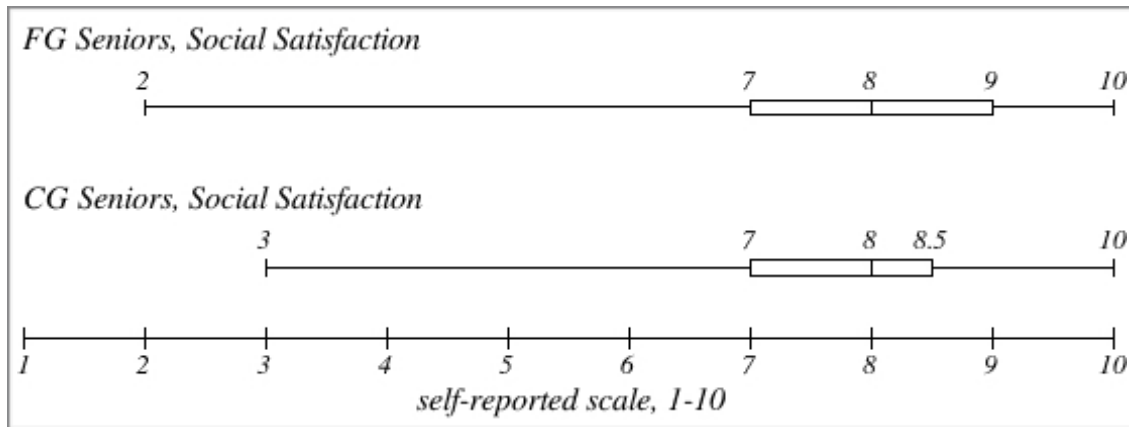
Comparing senior responses to the same students' sophomore ratings, first-generation participants were more likely to report variation between sophomore and senior year, both upward and downward (*See Figure 12* below). For instance, one student reported an overall social experience by sophomore year as a "5" but revised it upward to a "10" by senior year, while another student reported an overall rating of "7" during sophomore year and a "2" by senior year. While this was by no means universal--many first-generation students reported similar ratings between sophomore and senior year ("similar" defined here as within 1 point on the 1-10 scale)--first-generation students were

more likely to frame their social experiences as a series of peaks and valleys,

characterized primarily either a rocky beginning or a trough during sophomore

or early junior year.

**Figure 12: First-Generation Self-Reported Social Rating,
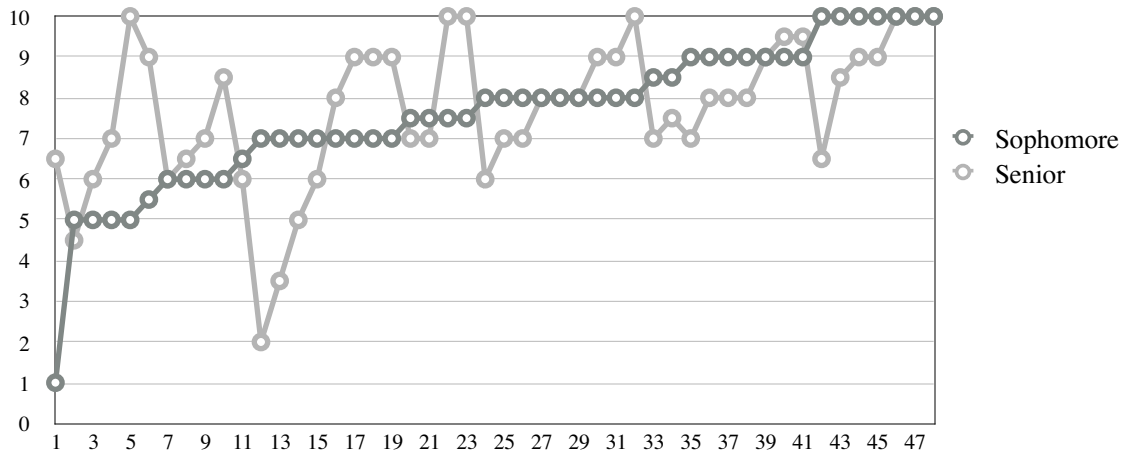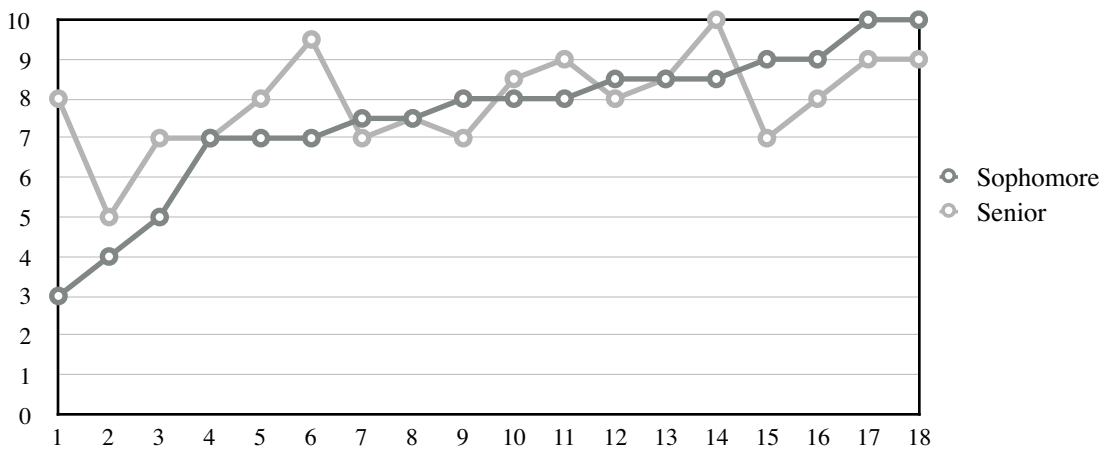Sophomore to Senior Year**

**Figure 13: Continuing Generation Self-Reported Social Rating,
Sophomore to Senior Year**

37.5% (n=18) of first-generation participants who rated their social

experiences both as sophomores and as seniors changed their overall rating

between sophomore and senior year by at least 1.5 points. Eleven respondents revised their assessment upward, while 7 revised the assessment downward. By contrast, continuing generation participants were more likely to report similar ratings for their social experiences between sophomore and senior year (*See Figure 13*). 27.8% (n=5) of continuing generation participants who rated their social experiences twice revised their overall social rating by at least 1.5 points between sophomore and senior year. Among those who changed, only one continuing generation senior revised his assessment of social experiences downward.

Both first- and continuing generation participants explained that their self-assessed social ratings were based on a combination of personal, social, and institutional factors. The more likely they were to have found a tight-knit group of friends or extracurricular colleagues on campus, the higher their reported satisfaction rates for both first- and continuing generation students.[77] Those who reported wide variation between sophomore and senior year--again, a more common response from first-generation than continuing generation participants-- were also less likely to report having close friends or participating in an extracurricular group that mattered to them. While the social experience scale indicates that first- and continuing generation students ended up with similar

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[77] These findings support those elaborated in Light (2001) concerning the importance of forming a wide network of friends and extracurricular engagements early in college.

rates of social satisfaction by their senior year, more informal and policy-based practices may be utilized to support first-generation students early in their post-secondary journey to mitigate the peaks and valleys experienced while adjusting to a new social life on campus.

On Social Successes and Challenges

While first- and continuing generation participants may have reported similar rates of satisfaction with their overall social experiences on campus, content and thematic analysis of their response to interview questions asking them to describe their "greatest successes and challenges in terms of social life" indicates important patterns of similarity and difference. First- and continuing generation students highlight certain social experiences as similarly important: joining clubs, making friends, developing community within their residence halls. But first- and continuing generation participants also tend to frame these experiences--friend making, extracurricular involvement, leadership--differently. And there are important narrative divergences, too, in that first-generation participants raised social concerns that were largely absent in continuing generation narratives of their social lives on campus.

Both first- and continuing generation students described their "greatest successes" with social life in college as making friends, finding community, and

taking leadership positions in extracurricular activities. Their reported "greatest challenges," however, were different. The most common first-generation responses included: "culture shock" concerning an abrupt change from public high school to an elite private college and their new participation in a world of "privilege;" dealing with quotidian challenges regarding financing social life and managing social class differences; finding ways to speak to peers in class who talk "in the abstract" about social conditions that relate to them directly and personally but that do not relate to the speakers; finding or cultivating spaces on campus where they feel they belong and are validated; and finally, overcoming homesickness and negotiating family ties from afar. Commonly reported "greatest challenges" for continuing generation students included: finding welcoming and open social spaces on campus; tackling the problem of sexual assault on campus; dealing with the contested role of exclusive social clubs, either through their efforts to make these social clubs more inclusive or through their critique of exclusive social clubs as corrosive to social life; or, they reported no social challenges. Below I describe a few themes—friendships, extracurriculars, and belonging—that organize how first- and continuing generation students framed their social experiences on campus.

Friendships

When asked about their greatest social success in college, the most common response for first- and continuing generation students alike entailed meeting people and forming friendships on campus. The majority of first-generation participants explained that their friend groups comprised fellow students from a wide variety of backgrounds, representing the ethnic and social class diversity of the university as a whole. They met their closest friends either in their residence halls (the most commonly reported way), their extracurriculars (a close second), through other friends, or, to a lesser extent, in their courses and majors. A minority of first-generation students reported that their friend groups were comprised almost entirely of students whose backgrounds were similar to theirs, either in terms of social class or ethnic identity. Those first-generation participants who reported having friends who were mostly from similar backgrounds said that they met their close friends early in college, either during their pre-orientation programs or through ethnic identity organizations they joined in their freshman year. Some of these first-generation students reported "branching out" towards the end of their junior or early senior year in an attempt to make friends with people from different backgrounds, but those efforts were often less successful than for those first-generation students who sought to make friends with a diverse group of students early in their college going process.

Continuing generation participants generally reported having a diverse friend group in terms of both socio-economic status and racial/ethnic identity. They claimed to have met their friends in similar contexts to first-generation participants: residence halls (1), other friends (2), extracurriculars (3), and their courses or majors (4). Compared to first-generation participants, continuing generation students were more likely to say that they had few close friends in college.

Both first- and continuing generation students commented that it could be challenging to forge meaningful friendships in the context of a competitive academic or extracurricular environment. Either people were "too busy" or "too work oriented" to meaningfully connect with one another. Nonetheless, forming life-long friends was the most common response among both first- and continuing generation participants when asked to describe their greatest social success in college.

Extracurricular Involvement

Extracurricular involvement, and by senior year, leadership in at least one organization, was a critical source of social satisfaction for first- and continuing generation students alike. First-generation students were more likely to join an ethnic organization (19% FG, 6% CG), although they did not exclusively select

ethnic organizations that matched their personal ethnic identity. Indeed, many first-generation participants in our sample stated that they were curious to learn about other people and cultures and so joined organizations based on that curiosity rather than racial or ethnic identity. First-generation students also participated in and became leaders of ethnic organizations affiliated with their personal racial or ethnic identity at higher rates than continuing generation students. They joined volunteer and community-based organizations at higher rates as well (17% FG, 13% CG). Continuing generation students were more likely to play sports (19% CG, 13% FG) or join social organizations unrecognized by the university.[78] First- and continuing generation participants were approximately equally likely to join pre-professional organizations, groups that aligned with their major, arts or performance clubs, or to work part-time (*see* Gable, 2014).

Both first- and continuing generation participants took their extracurricular involvement very seriously, and considered it imperative to forming the networks that sustained them in college and that would likely support them upon graduation. Both first- and continuing generation students considered extra-curricular organizations as a primary context for making "friends for life." Anthony, a first-generation senior, stated:

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[78] At Georgetown, these included unrecognized fraternities and sororities, as well as a few co-educational business organizations. At Harvard, these included final clubs, social clubs such as the all-male Oak Club, fraternities, and sororities.

> My biggest success was the scope of different social circles I've been able to branch out to. I feel like I've met a lot of individuals through different organizations, by taking part in different programs, and not restricting myself to my blocking group[79] or something like that. That's a success, being able to meet a ton of people.

Likewise, first-generation Elizabeth stated, "Successes were…getting involved in organizations and having multiple cohorts of people I am involved with." For these and many other first-generation participants, having multiple groups of friends, forged through extracurricular involvement, signaled deep engagement with the college and afforded them social networks that they believed would serve them well upon graduation.

For students who rated their social satisfaction low, like first-generation senior Rosemary who rated her social experience a "6", one reason they felt disconnected from the college was because of their failure to commit to a meaningful extracurricular early during their time in college. Rosemary reflected, "I feel like I didn't get involved in extracurriculars to the extent that I wanted." When asked why that was the case, she responded, "I don't think I branched out enough or tried new things, not only out of my comfort zone but outside of my *people* comfort zone. A lot of things I do involve people I already know." She lamented not taking risks and trying new social organizations early in college,

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[79] Blocking groups are self-selected housing groups of up to eight students who share rooms or suites in one of Harvard's 12 residential houses.

but as a senior she worked to rectify her perceived lack of connection. Joining an ethnic organization was a meaningful first step:

> I also came into school very adamant not wanting to find friends in my racial group, and now I think I missed out on having those kinds of networks and support systems. I joined the Chinese Student Association this year as a senior, and I wish I'd joined as a freshman. Some of the new recruits were surprised that I joined so late. They asked, "Why are you joining as a senior and not as a freshman?" I said, "Well, I didn't want to join then, but I do now."

Rosemary's point about not wanting to join an ethnic group but changing her mind when she realized the kind of support structures these organizations offer raises another common issue among first-generation participants. For many of our first-generation participants, ethnic organizations were important sources of social connection and comfort in the often unfamiliar circumstances of an elite college. And from their perspective, many participants believed that other first-generation students were more likely to participate in ethnic organizations, and so they joined these groups assuming that they would meet "other students like me," not just ethnically but who had similar familial backgrounds or childhood upbringing. While this assumption did not always bear out, in many cases first-generation participants felt confirmed in their belief that ethnic associations operated as safe spaces and places where they did not have to "explain themselves" or their prior life experiences to others, in part because they believed

other first-generation students populated these groups at higher rates than other social organizations.

Beyond safe spaces, ethnic organizations also offered near-peer mentors eager to guide younger students in transitioning into and navigating the college. For older members, having younger students look up to them gave them a heightened sense of purpose and motivation. Older members coached junior members in social and academic behaviors that would optimize positive outcomes: they strategized responses to insensitive remarks that could be made by classmates in a seminar or discussion context; they role played scenarios and methods to avoid challenges faced by prior members; and they provided invaluable advice about approaching faculty and teaching assistants regularly throughout courses, finding and cultivating faculty mentors, improving time management and creating study groups. They were also sources of fun and a release from the competitive extracurricular environment, as these groups were open to all students, operated their initiation processes on the apprenticeship model, and accommodated varying levels of involvement and opportunities for leadership.

It is clear that their level of extracurricular involvement shaped how satisfied both first- and continuing generation students were with their overall social life in college. The general pattern among both groups suggested that

students with a strong commitment to one or two extracurricular organizations, plus a loose connection with a third group (or alternatively, involvement in residence hall activities) were most satisfied with their social experiences in college. The opportunity to hold at least one leadership role between sophomore and senior year was also essential.

While extracurricular involvement was to critical to social satisfaction, our participants also raised challenges to access and participation among certain types of extracurricular groups. For instance, first-generation senior Ironman complained at several junctures in the interview about "applying for every position worth having" at his college:

> You have to apply for anything if you want to be a part of it, and your
> social life is based on the organizations you are a part of. I wasn't
> aware of that at first. So it's definitely challenging breaking in if you
> don't know that going in.

During his first semester in college, Ironman attempted to join organizations he considered interesting, only to discover that an application deadline had passed or that he did not meet the application criteria. This became a source of considerable frustration, but he overcame these obstacles by researching application deadlines and applying early in subsequent rounds. While relevant information about extracurricular timelines was not readily available or centrally located, he eventually navigated the process successfully. Others were less fortunate.

Of course not all extracurricular activities require an application, but the application or "comping" process, as it is called at Harvard, can feel daunting and at times even exclusionary, even when application criteria and deadlines are widely available and accessible. Some participants recounted that they refused to join clubs that required an application, but that many of those clubs appeared more socially exciting and potentially more powerful in terms of the social and pre-professional networks they offered. Several participants argued that thinking of extracurriculars in terms of their economic value proposition could be potentially corrosive of relationships. Elizabeth, the first-generation senior mentioned above, was involved in a range of clubs. She argued:

> Sometimes I feel that people are too work-oriented. You get this sense that people here try to do too many things and are not committed to any one thing. Relationships didn't feel genuine with those people.

Another first-generation senior, Fay, who served as a leader in several organizations ranging from club sports to a volunteer organization and a pre-orientation program, framed her relationship to extracurriculars as such:

> I think freshman year, it's a competitive campus, so the second semester everyone is a leader of some group and sometimes that can feel isolating if you don't know your place yet. First semester I joined a bunch of things trying to find my place. I was also trying to balance what I want and 'climbing the ladder,' and just being in a competitive place all the time is a challenge.

Incidentally, Fay, Elizabeth, and Ironman all rated their social experience a "9."[80]

While they found their extracurricular involvement challenging in nuanced

ways, they were nonetheless very satisfied with the social outcomes this

participation conferred—friendship, belonging, opportunities for leadership

development.

Both first- and continuing generation participants spoke ambivalently

about competitive extracurricular organizations. Competitive, or application-

based extracurriculars, ranged from *a cappella* groups to fraternities and sororities

to the college newspaper. Our participants considered the application or "comp"

process as salutary when it operated like an apprenticeship, but deleterious

when near-peers judged students' worthiness, merit, or relative value to the

organization. For instance, continuing generation senior MacNeill pointed out

that "comping" for the college radio entailed enduring other students'

interrogations of his music taste and choice of arrangements. As he put it,

> I have been so turned off by the comping process. I can't even join a
> radio show here without comping. Everything is about comping. It's
> very pedantic. I don't want to comp for things that shouldn't be

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[80] These three participants' discussion about the challenges of extracurricular involvement while at the same time offering high marks for their social satisfaction was not uncommon in our sample. In order to discern whether these students shared other features that might account for their similarity, I cross-checked their responses by high school type, ethnicity, and major. Each of these students, along with the remainder of the sample who rated their social experiences highly, came from different high school backgrounds, were of different ethnicities, and had selected widely disparate majors. So there did not appear to be obvious biographical factors associated with these outcomes.

stressful or competitive, it's just a huge turn-off, especially for older students like me.

Eliza, a first-generation senior, echoed MacNeill's sentiments about social exclusion, adding a practical concern regarding the unanticipated and otherwise unremarked financial costs to club leadership:

> It would be great to break down the really competitive nature of clubs, where you have to apply to everything. Georgetown feels like the only place in the world left *where you apply to your social life.* Some clubs brag that they have an acceptance rate of 10%. These clubs serve to exclude just as much as the way frats and sororities supposedly do, and they're extracurriculars! And leadership costs money. You have to throw parties and keep people happy. So no wonder all of the leaders of the major extra-curricular groups are well-off. They can afford to spend some of their own money. Or they know how to get extra money to manage the social requirements of being that leader.

Certain competitive organizations, such as the primarily social "final clubs" at Harvard and the student- run food service chain "The Corp" at Georgetown, were singled out as populated almost exclusively by the campuses's well-heeled students. While this statement may not be factually true, it framed the discourse around these organizations' merits during our interviews. Continuing generation participants were their primary defenders, although more than half of our continuing generation participants also complained about the exclusionary tone and practices of these and other clubs. One continuing generation member of a final club, Emily, confessed that it was challenging to belong to a club that "is viewed negatively by the college, for the

most part." But she stressed that her participation advanced her opportunities as

a female leader and "as someone who wants to see women socially at the same

level as men on this campus," a goal she assumed the college's administrators

would support.

> The reason I joined this particular club was that as a first year student
> when I looked at upperclass women who I admired, not just socially
> but who have done really incredible things—those who go on to
> become Rhodes Scholars and go to incredible law schools and med
> schools—they are there. The alumni, having a network of women who
> have graduated from Harvard and who want to see you succeed and
> want to help you. For example, later today I will be sending my
> resume and other information to an alumna to look over my
> application materials for a particular job because she works in a similar
> position I'd like to get into. So having that is tremendous.

Other continuing generation participants would disagree with Emily, arguing

that the entire system must be overhauled or dismantled before equality can be

achieved.[81] But the debate largely exists among continuing generation

participants, as first-generation participants are unanimous in their distaste for

these clubs. Fraternities and sororities, however, are often attractive to first-

generation participants at Harvard and Georgetown, largely because they are

viewed as inclusive, entail open membership rules, and are more diverse than

either the final clubs or Corp.

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[81] Changes in the role and power of Harvard's unrecognized final clubs may be afoot. In early
May 2016, Harvard College announced that it would sanction single-sex final club members,
beginning with the class of 2021. Any undergraduate member of a single-sex final club would be
ineligible to hold a team captaincy in a college-sanctioned sport, maintain a leadership position in
any recognized student group, or to receive university endorsement for its top scholarships
(http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/5/6/college-sanctions-clubs-greeklife/)

First-Generation Specific Organizations

Many first-generation participants spoke of another extracurricular organization that impacted their social satisfaction in college but that would not be relevant to our continuing generation participants. That is, the first-generation student group. For Georgetown students, this was organized as a university-sponsored program, the Georgetown Scholarship Program (GSP), with staff and a director and ties to other administrative offices across the university. The GSP, which was launched in 2005, conducted weekly and monthly gatherings, issued a newsletter, co-sponsored campus-wide events throughout the year, hosted office hours and assisted students on a variety of personal, social, pre-professional, and academic matters. For Harvard students, the primary source of first-generation specific extracurricular involvement was the First Generation Student Union (FGSU), a student-led club founded during the course of this research study with a loose faculty sponsorship, an operating budget in line with other student groups, and no specific programming agenda beyond raising awareness, fostering pride, and administering peer support. During the course of this study, the FGSU hosted campus events such as study breaks, community meetings and student speakers, a peer mentorship program, and a first-generation parents' reception during Junior Parents Weekend. It also sponsored a

national event, the 2016 IvyG Conference, a well-attended inter-Ivy first-generation student conference featuring nationally renowned speakers (see Kahlenberg, 2016). Other extracurricular groups and administrative offices on Harvard's campus offer similar programs to the GSP, but their services are spread throughout the university in capillary fashion while Georgetown's first-generation services are centralized in the GSP office. It is important to note that the GSP evolved over the course of more than a decade, ever incorporating student feedback and ideas into its programming and execution of services. The FGSU is still a new program, and may potentially evolve over time into an organization more akin to the GSP.

While the interview protocol did not specifically ask first-generation participants whether they were members of one of these first-generation groups, the interviewers took note of whether they included a first-generation group as one of their extracurriculars or whether they listed the students and staff in these groups as mentors. At Harvard, approximately 10% of first-generation participants reported participating in the FGSU. Those who participated were enthusiastic about its message, but many who did not participate were either suspicious of its purpose or considered it irrelevant to their experiences. Some stated that they were unaware of its existence. Several participants joined the group but stopped attending because they found it "cliquey" or "complaining."

By contrast, at Georgetown, all first-generation participants were familiar with the GSP, even those first-generation students (approximately 10%) who did not qualify as official members because of parental income limits. Remarkably, every mention of the GSP in our interviews was framed not only as positive but as "above and beyond." Students were impressed with how the GSP staff went out of their way to support their members. For instance, when asked about which extracurriculars were most relevant to her time in college, first-generation student, Q, responded:

> GSP was another support network. [GSP staff members' names] are amazing. You know you can go to that office with a range of issues, and one, they've heard it before, so it's okay. And they can give you an action plan and help you solve the problem, whatever it is. Sometimes you need adults who can say, "We can take care of this."

Students dealing with serious personal and family crises turned to the GSP for support, and were not disappointed. When asked if there was ever a time when she needed help for a personal matter in college, Reyna reflected:

> Yes. Pretty much all of college. I went through a lot. Freshman year my mom attempted suicide. Sophomore year I tore my ACL. Last year there was a huge family thing. And through all of it GSP helped. My GSP mentor called me all summer. Whenever I needed anything, when I tore my ACL — at one point I was in a wheel chair, [GSP staff member's name] came and wheeled me to class and bought me breakfast. Just above and beyond.
>
> I don't think I would have ever excelled the way I have without that mental health support. My back home is really intense and it's hard to concentrate on a paper when real life things are happening. It's great

that GSP has funds to back up that support. They got me into counseling when I needed it, and they pay for my sessions.

Even for students who were wary of joining ethnic organizations or expressed concern about appearing as "victims," the GSP provided a welcome refuge in times of stress. First-generation Francis, who avoided the campus's multicultural center because he thought it cordoned off ethnic minorities from the rest of campus, stated, "GSP, though, does a really good job. They bring students from different backgrounds, different races, different ethnicities and sexual orientations. I go there to hang out. They can be white, black, Chinese, whatever." And while it was not generally the first extracurricular that students discussed when describing their extracurricular involvements, students framed it as a place to turn in times of crisis, when they wanted to get ahead, or when they needed a place to relax and call home.[82]

Belonging

The topic of "belonging" arose in several parts of the interview. This is where the primary differences between first- and continuing generation participants arose with regard to social satisfaction. For first- and continuing

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[82] It is important to note that a small group (fewer than 5) of first-generation seniors claimed not to attend GSP events because they perceived it as "not for me." These were white students who worried that they would not be welcomed in what they considered a minority-focused organization. After the conclusion of our interviews, however, at least two of these seniors began attending GSP events and enlisted as peer mentors.
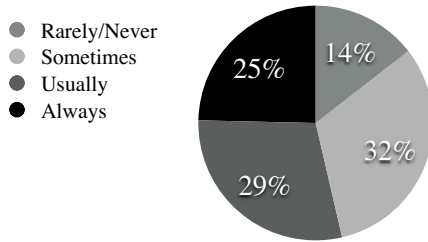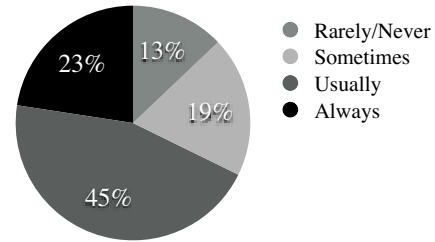
Fig. 14: FG "Part of Campus Community"

- Rarely/Never
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

14%
25%
29%
32%

Fig. 15: CG "Part of Campus Community"

- Rarely/Never
- Sometimes
- Usually
- Always

13%
23%
19%
45%

generation seniors as a whole, each group expressed a range of sentiment from feeling isolated and unhappy to completely integrated and fulfilled with their social experiences in college. First- and continuing generation participants had similar rates of reporting at the two extremes: 14% of first-generation and 13% of continuing generation respondents reported feeling like they were "never" or "rarely" a part of the campus community, while 25% of first-generation and 23% of continuing generation respondents reported feeling "always" a part of the campus community. Bracketing these two extremes, first-generation seniors were more likely to say that they only "sometimes" felt a part of the overall campus community (32% FG, 19% CG), while continuing generation seniors were more likely to report they "usually" felt a part of the overall campus community (45% CG, 29% FG), suggesting a marginally higher level of integration. While these differences are not statistically significant (p=.1116), they nonetheless help clarify nuanced distinctions that emerge elsewhere in the interviews.

For instance, in open-ended follow-up questions first-generation participants sometimes described a rough beginning due to "culture shock," homesickness, or a perceived lack of social fit that slowly eroded and was replaced by a more secure sense of belonging by senior year. As first-generation senior, Nate, put it, "it takes time to find your place." Others described a staccato integration, or random and surprise moments of feeling connected. Or, they critiqued the idea of a "campus community" altogether. These first-generation seniors described the university as "fragmented," "hierarchical," or "disconnected," except for specific all-university rituals such as Georgetown's "Hoya Saxa Weekend" or Harvard's "Housing Day." Instead of an all-campus community, they spoke of the communities they forged with friends, roommates, and members of the clubs they joined or created.

By contrast, continuing generation participants were more likely to adopt the concept of a whole-campus community in their responses. They also narrated their integration into the perceived community in the reverse of first-generation participants: they authored a sustained sense of belonging with isolated moments of loneliness or detachment. Some continuing generation participants also critiqued the idea of a "campus community," but they did so less frequently than first-generation participants, and when they did they spoke of it as a

corrosive myth rather than an unfulfilled promise. And while it is true that some

first-generation participants rejected the notion that they were isolated by their

peers—for example, first-generation Ileana said, "I feel like I am a part of the

Harvard community. I feel like some people feel isolated, but I think that I am

Harvard because I go to Harvard. If they want to distance themselves from the

institution, then fine. But I feel like I am Harvard because I go to Harvard, and no

one can tell me otherwise"—it was nonetheless more common for first-

generation participants to speak of rough beginnings and periodic painful

isolation.

Belonging: Perceived Through Distance & Return

First-generation participants narrated their sense (or lack) of belonging in

different ways from continuing generation participants as well. For many first

generation participants, like Anthony, the revelation of belonging came when

they they realized they were no longer "afraid to state my opinion or take a

stand." Earlier in our interview, Anthony stated, "I definitely thought I had to fit

this certain type of profile … But over time I realized it's just not like that." This

growing sense of belonging is generally associated with building friendships

across different social groups, deepening commitments in extracurriculars,

experiencing validation of one's personal and cultural background, easing into

one's major, and becoming involved in residence life, all factors of integration

raised by our participants and described in detail by higher education theorists

(*e.g.* Tinto, 1975; Kuh & Love, 2004; Tierney, 2004). But perhaps surprisingly, for

Anthony and other first-generation participants in our sample, this change in

mindset was triggered by a study abroad experience. Leaving campus and

meeting students from other countries loosened his image of what a college

student should like and act like. He returned to campus more relaxed and less

afraid of fitting a specific image of the "Harvard student." At Georgetown, many

first-generation students who studied abroad reported experiencing the same

relief: by traveling, they felt a loosening of the pressure to perform as "Jack and

Jane Hoya." First-generation student Agnes, who studied abroad in an

impoverished region of the Global South, framed her growing comfort with

Georgetown (and her identity as partly shaped by the fact she was now a

Georgetown student and afforded certain privileges as a result) as incepted by

her experience abroad. Studying abroad helped her to "be comfortable in my

own skin." Agnes reflected on how her year away from Georgetown engendered

a new perspective:

> You try to fit into a box, into a bubble. To fit the "Jack and Jane Hoya"
> picture. I already distort the box because I'm a first-gen. On top of that
> I am a deeply religious Catholic. I don't have to be a stereotypical
> student here. I can reconcile my faith and my academics.

Leaving campus is sometimes the best way to gain perspective on one's

social experiences in college. First-generation Tolu, who rated her overall social

experiences a 3.5 (one of the lowest ratings provided), agreed to an interview via

Skype while she was studying abroad in her senior year. She responded as such

when asked to what extent she felt a part of the "campus community":

> Not very much. I'm trying to figure out why and that's kind of why
> I'm here [studying abroad]. I was very unhappy at Georgetown and I
> wanted to leave but I didn't want to take a year off so that's why I'm
> studying abroad. I had a few close friends, but I didn't feel like I fit the
> culture. But now that I'm away, I feel better about it. When I'm far
> away, I feel part of Georgetown. But when I'm there I don't really feel
> it.

I spoke to Tolu in the middle of her semester abroad. Already she was narrating a

trajectory from feeling disconnected to adopting Georgetown as her own, to

feeling "part of" her college. If Tolu's experience follows the pattern of Anthony

and Agnes, she may also experience a more connected and satisfying final return

semester as a result of her time abroad.

While a subset of continuing generation participants also studied abroad

and found their experiences there to be meaningful and even transformative,

they did not tend to narrate their encounters abroad with improved integration

into the campus community upon return. It is possible the continuing generation

participants take for granted that studying abroad will afford them a deeper

perspective on their overall time in college. But first-generation participants

appeared pleasantly surprised by how salutary studying abroad was as they

reflected upon their overall time in college, and so they underscored the

relevance of study abroad to their sense of belonging.

Financing Belonging & Navigating Social Class Differences

Beyond realizing that they did not need to fit a "certain type of profile,"

many first-generation participants spoke specifically about learning to navigate

financial headwinds that affected their sense of belonging. These included

paying for meals, clothes, surprise medical expenses, or trips home. But they also

entailed more comportment related issues such as figuring out how to gracefully

decline (or selectively accept when possible) invitations out to restaurants or

events with friends, whether and how to accept someone else's offer to pay for

meals or social activities in order to participate, how to fit in sartorially, and how

to engage in small talk and feel comfortable "networking." Social class theorists,

borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu's (1998) pathbreaking work on the relationship

between elite schooling and the reproduction of social class in France, would

describe these issues as related to learning the dominant forms of social and

cultural capital and adopting behaviors and tastes (or *habitus*) in order to

advance in a social field. As such, attending an elite university is not about

deepening one's academic knowledge for its own sake, but learning to deploy

that knowledge in appropriate contexts and to comport oneself in ways that

confer the benefits of privilege. First-generation Paola provided a description of

her experiences along these lines:

> Harvard was not anything I expected it to be at all. I was expecting to
> come to a community where people are open about their beliefs and
> are excited to engage with people who are different from them. But it
> was not like that at all. There were social norms and expectations that I
> didn't know and I had to learn. The ways that people engage in
> conversation, the ways that people interact with each other, the way
> that they know about each other and this entire culture, the way
> people dress, the places they shop, the things that they do for leisure. It
> was this whole culture that I had no experience with, and the
> expectation was that you acted that way or you missed out on
> opportunities to meet people and become part of these networks that
> people were building at Harvard. I learned them and you kind of
> know how to talk the talk, things like small talk and going to
> networking events and giving an elevator speech about yourself. You
> can be the most qualified candidate but unless you know how to say
> "Hi, how are you, do you know [so-and-so]," you feel like an outsider.

Our continuing generation participants generally did not discuss these and other

class-related concerns. If they were an issue, it was not something they felt the

university bore a responsibility to alleviate. But for our first-generation

participants, the university and its administrators, as gatekeepers of a privileged

class they were set to enter through their elite education, could and should offer

guidance, support, and a sympathetic ear as they learned to navigate the often

unspoken rules of behavior they perceived as requisite to access to social

privileges and inclusion on campus.

Some first-generation participants chose to deal with the issue of class distinction by associating primarily with fellow students from similar backgrounds. This is the strategy I call *bulwarking.* These participants generally found social support and near-peer mentors in ethnic, volunteer, and religious associations they joined, or through their roommates and neighbors in their residence halls. Their primary source of discomfort was found in classroom contexts, when fellow students made insensitive comments that went unremarked upon or unanswered by fellow students or the instructor.

Other first-generation participants chose to associate with students from different economic backgrounds, but were clear to disclose their lower-income upbringing. They acted as teachers and ambassadors of a different lifestyle to their peers, and were less likely to complain about insensitive classroom comments. They often engaged their peers through telling their personal stories to build empathy and understanding, a strategy I call *pride work*.

Still others labored to blend in with their wealthier peers, opting to keep their personal history private, a strategy of *assimilation*. First-generation Jake, who during his sophomore interview elaborated on his quest to blend in with wealthier peers by mimicking their dress, hair, speech acts, and table manners, elected this route:

> Up until this point I've only told two of my friends that my parents did
> not go to college. I never ask people where their parents went to school

because I know the obvious response would be that they would ask me
where my parents went and I don't want to talk about it. I wish there
wasn't this stigma attached to being first-gen. Just being on financial
aid in general, I just don't want to be in that conversation. The fact that
they don't know that obviously leads them to assume things. They
assume that I come from a well-off family, and that we all do the same
things that their families do.

Jake and others who attempted to pass for continuing generation described

wishing they knew very specific habitual details they perceived to be markers of

the upper class: how to dress, eat, talk, and behave in polite company. They

pointed out that knowing these habits would help them enter into and advance

in careers that were generally populated by scions of the wealthy: banking,

global finance, the business managerial class, and government leadership. Could

the university assist their development of these habits through workshops, meals

out, and networking events? The Georgetown Scholarship Program offered such

activities, and those first-generation students who attended spoke approvingly

about how these events helped them to develop the "soft skills" requisite for

candidacy in global firms and in politics.[83] But these events are also perceived as

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[83] For example, when asked what the university could do to better support first-generation
students, first-generation senior Alien responded: "Things related to soft skills, I would say. It
can be anything from dining table etiquette or how to send out a proper e-mail, these things that
a lot of people like me don't know. At Georgetown and even when you graduate from
Georgetown a lot of people end up in privileged positions and have to deal with people who
have this kind of upbringing. Before Georgetown I never knew what to do at a dining table. So
those soft skills. It would be important to teach those. GSP works on that."

reifying standards set by wealthier students and their families, and so are viewed

broadly as assimilative rather than accommodating of diversity.

First-generation participants who successfully blended in on campus

found themselves periodically mistaken for wealthier peers. These students often

felt conflicted about whether to disclose their personal histories. First-generation

Gretchen, a graduate of an elite day school who elsewhere stated, "I wouldn't

want people knowing that I was first-gen," explained her divergent emotions

regarding how she presented herself to others and whether she felt a part of the

campus community:

> Sometimes I don't know where I fit in. If I weren't thinking about all
> these other things [that make me feel connected], it would be really
> high. I would say a "9." But thinking about it makes it different. Lots of
> my friends don't know that I'm first-generation. Most people I interact
> with don't realize it. People don't look at me and realize. If I tell
> people, then they are surprised when I say that I'm on full financial
> aid. I'm aware that I blend in well. The clothes I wear. No one knows.
> But there is a tension. I still believe I am a full part of the Harvard
> community. But part of my personal identity is tough. When I have my
> Harvard hat on, I'm fully fine. But is this *me?*

Gretchen struggled with how to present herself on campus. But she also believed

that certain features of her biography were "deeply personal" and not subject to

examination by her peers. Other students who opted to avoid disclosing their

first-generation status found themselves occasionally accused of class-based

insensitivity. First-generation Marie, who grew up in a rural community with

working class parents, described her personal conflict with self-presentation on campus:

> There seems to be a perception of first-generation students that isn't always true. People imagine minority, alternative, or they look poor… I've had people say to me, "I don't believe you're a first-gen." I've had people call me elitist, which I think is hilarious. I don't fit the stereotypical FG mold. I'm also Republican. I've been accused of being wealthy. Someone once trying to insult me said, "You've never cooked food in your life and you're an elitist Republican." I don't know if there's a way that we could change the perception of what first-generation students are. When you see a white girl wearing business clothes, because I'm on an internship, you think, "Oh, that girl is in the business school and her parents have money." And for me at least, that's not true.

Marie is trying to get ahead, and like others in the sample, her strategy is to acquire the habits and taste (or cultural capital) of those in her desired profession. And like other first-generation participants who choose this route to success, she feels that this will allow her to support her family when she is successful. But this, too, can be overwhelming. As first-generation senior Ironman put it, in seeking to ensure his family's financial security, "I never stopped to think what *I* was interested in." Following a path set by wealthier students does not ensure satisfaction, as Ironman reflected, but it does alleviate immediate financial worries, an important consideration in the ongoing calculus of self-presentation.

Different responses to dealing with class-based differences (among peers and in relation to the institution as a whole) in an elite university are not new.[84] The endurance of these challenges and the pathways first-generation students take—from *bulwarking* to *pride work* to *assimilation*—all serve to underscore the summons to define oneself in relation to one's peers in a context that is not and has never been as meritocratic and open as it aspires to be. This study did not seek to assess which of the above behavioral pathways led to better social outcomes, but it is imperative that administrators and university leaders understand the variation in whether or not, and to what extent, first-generation students embrace this status in the presence of their peers.

<u>Race & Belonging: The Context of An Elite, Predominantly White University</u>

Similar to the class-based concerns, first-generation participants were also likely to frame challenges to belonging in terms of race, particularly if they identified as an underrepresented minority at the university. Some first-generation participants who were also students of color expressed intense feelings of dis-ease attending a university that appears to presume its modal

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[84] For example, see Horowitz (1988) for a history of campus life from the student perspective from the 18th century to the late 20th century. See also Karabel (2005) for a history of elite admissions and exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

student is both white and wealthy.[85] Tolu, for instance, lamented on "this whole

'I don't belong here' feeling." She continued, "the normal Georgetown people,

they're a bit unapproachable." Other first-generation participants framed racial

challenges as low-level, quotidian, and enervating. As first-generation Eliza put

it, "It is draining to so often be the only minority student in the room, to be the

only person who knows what this means, what this is, or who can explain what

work study is, etc." Eliza often found herself performing as an unwilling

representative of an entire race or socio-economic class, a role she found dubious

and degrading.

Other racial minorities elected to consort with fellow students who shared

their backgrounds, thereby bulwarking themselves from a perceived "white" and

"preppy" campus. When asked to what extent she felt a part of the Georgetown

community, first-generation Q, a graduate of an elite day school who identifies as

immigrant, black, and Latina, replied,

> I think it depends on what community you're talking about. The Black
> and Latino community, I'm very part of that. Greater cookie-cutter
> Georgetown community, I'm not a part of that. I don't always feel like
> the target audience for greater Georgetown events.

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[85] The issue of race on campus became increasingly important over the four years of this study, as the Black Lives Matter movement emerged (2013) and found student support at both Harvard and Georgetown. In the spring of 2014 and fall of 2015, a series of racially motivated incidents occurred, sparking first protest and then dialogue with each university's administrations. These events likely affected what students chose to discuss in their interviews, especially among first-generation participants who identified as traditionally underrepresented minorities.

First-generation Reyna, who proffered the rallying cheer "Hoya Blacksa" (a riff

on the college cheer "Hoya Saxa"), explained her experiences as such:

> Being a student of color on campus is such a different experience. I
> have a close community, and I'm *known* for something…Being a leader
> on campus that works with minorities, you're known for a lot…I feel
> very much a part of the minority community. It feels like a different
> school, really. In terms of the general community, the sexual assault
> issues I felt very involved because it affects everyone. I don't have any
> 'general' Georgetown friends outside that. People aren't the friendliest.
> I can have class with people and not know their name.

Still other first-generation participants spoke extensively about the

intersectionality of their multiple identities. They may be first-generation, low-

income, immigrant, and racial/ethnic minorities, or some combination of these

and other identities (gender, sexuality, and disability are examples of other

identities raised by participants). They may identify more or less intensely with

one or another of these identity features, depending on the company, the context,

and the issues addressed. Their practical concerns—ranging from documentation

status of family members to periodic food insecurity to loss of family homes due

to foreclosure—may overlap with those of other first-generation students while

remaining unique to their individual life histories. For many of these students,

the university stands for both a refuge from some of these "real world" problems

and a source of cognitive dissonance due to the "bubble" it fashions. Francis, a

first-generation Latino from Southern California, explained that he never

acclimated to the elite setting of his college because it felt "too white," describing

his feelings as such:

> Freshman year I would cry myself to bed. My roommate freshman
> year was also a minority student who came from the inner city. Even in
> the winter freshman year we would sleep with the windows open. Just
> to hear the noises outside, the sirens, the helicopters. You miss home:
> you miss the helicopters, the screeching tires, the sirens. It's where you
> come from. So you miss it, no matter what others think.

Being male, Latino, devoutly Catholic, and low-income in the context of a

predominantly white, wealthy, and (in his estimation) fairly hedonistic

undergraduate student body was intensely challenging for Francis in multiple

and unanticipated ways. He found succor among the priests on campus, the

Georgetown Scholars Program, and friends from his residence hall. But Francis

was also adamant that his time in college, including the emotional and practical

challenges he faced, was an imperative and definitive step along his life's path.

Francis aspires to return home to work toward improving the quality of public

services in his low-income community, to run for public office and to eventually

win a seat in the U.S. Congress. For several years as an undergraduate, he

worked for a U.S. Senator and held other paid positions on Capitol Hill. He is

grateful to Georgetown for opening these doors for him, and he is quick to

underscore his loyalty to *alma mater* despite a rough transition and four years:

> As hard as it's been, I love Georgetown. Whenever I go back home to
> talk to students, or I give a presentation to a thousand delegates, and
> has hard as it's been I love Georgetown. I don't regret coming here. I

get chills thinking of the opportunity and privilege of attending this school…When I worked off-campus, every paycheck I received I always anonymously sent $17.89 of my check to the 1789 Scholars Fund. When I make it big, this will be one of the places I support financially in a big way.

A Complicated Portrait of Belonging

It may be tempting to conclude that, in general, first-generation students were less satisfied with their social experiences on campus because they were more likely to express concerns or to disclose anxieties regarding belonging and fit on campus. As explored above, first-generation participants spoke at length about the challenges to feeling included on campus, ranging from a perceived lack of fit due to personality or style, financial and social class issues, and racial/ethnic differences that impact their sense of belonging. It is important to remember, however, that generally speaking, by senior year most first-generation participants had found deep and meaningful connections in college. This may have occurred with assistance from the university or by the students' own efforts to create the belonging they sought. Individual agency played an unmistakable role, as first-generation senior Karina reminded us: through the initiatives she launched and the changes she accomplished at the university, "I have *made* Harvard my community, not the other way around."

First-generation seniors were also generally satisfied with their social experiences, and proud of the connections they made. First-generation Sophia's response offered a typical reflection:

> Often I *do* feel connected, but not to a very social 'final clubs' kind of way. That's the only thing I'm not connected to. I feel very much that Harvard is my home. I'm really grateful for it…I think at Harvard if you don't have a group to be a part of you can have a really bad social experience. There were times when I felt left out and not included in what what happening, but other times when I felt totally surrounded by people who cared about me and were important to me.

By senior year, first-generation participants spoke of "ownership" and "belonging" in similar ways to their continuing generation peers. While their extracurricular involvement and choice of friends may reflect their personal experiences, social class, and racial/ethnic identities (among other ascribed and adopted identities), their satisfaction with their social experiences was similar to their continuing generation peers. This satisfaction was arrived at in complicated ways. Some first-generation participants found satisfaction by embracing their first-generation status and conducting *pride work* to raise awareness and encourage institutional commitment to their needs. Others gained confidence in the personal relationships they forged and the knowledge they gained in college, believing that they built the foundation for lifelong success during their college years. Still others remarked that social satisfaction came with maturation, experience, and the increased capacity to deal with social challenges as they

arose. First-generation Jake, who above spoke about avoiding discussing his first-generation identity with others, summed up his state of mind by senior year as such:

> When I made that realization that from now on people are going to judge me for what I do and not what my parents do, that made me feel more included into the Harvard community. And toward senior year, you just feel more connected and settled in what you're doing. You're not trying to find out who you are. If you're at a dinner with people who come from different backgrounds from you, then I feel okay just saying, "I don't want to go through my background with you."

For Jake and others, the choice of self-disclosure, and the opportunity to be judged by one's own actions rather than one's family biography, was an invaluable product of his elite college education.

3 P's for Social Satisfaction: Parents, Pre-College Connections, Post-College Plans

In addition to the organizations students joined and friends they made in college, this study found at least three factors that influenced first-generation social satisfaction that were not obviously related to their everyday lives on campus. These are summed as: parents, pre-college connections, and post-college plans. The findings below may be useful in guiding administrative practice with supporting first-generation students in future cohorts.

Parents

The interview protocol asked both first- and continuing generation students to speak briefly about whether their parents offered specific advice or guidance in academic, social, and personal matters while they were in college. Interviewers also paid special attention to moments throughout the interview when first- and continuing generation participants spoke about the role of their parents in their college experiences. It was hypothesized that first-generation participants would speak about a greater disconnect between themselves and their families, or would avoid talking to their parents out of fears of misunderstanding, alienation, or causing concern. It was also hypothesized that continuing generation participants would seek and receive more advice than their first-generation peers about choice of majors, pre-professional planning, and social interactions.

The sophomore and senior interviews generally supported the above hypotheses regarding differences in the role of parents between first- and continuing generation participants. First-generation participants generally uniformly responded that they received no advice from their parents in academic matters, and very little advice on social matters. By contrast, continuing generation participants spoke of receiving periodic to regular advice on both fronts (although they were quick to point out that their parents only offered

advice when they asked for it; everyone seemed to know someone else whose

parents were too "pushy" or did not allow their children to "individuate").[86]

But there were also unanticipated revelations about the role of parents in

first-generation students' college-going lives. These included the following: 1)

even though first-generation parents may not be able to provide specific

academic advice, they were often still involved in their children's academic

development: first-generation participants spoke regularly (even daily or

multiple times per day) about their college lives with their parents, often sharing

concepts and facts they learned in their courses with their parents and using

them as "soundboards" and sources of academic encouragement; 2) first-

generation participants desired that their parents have more opportunities to

become involved in their college lives, and wanted the university to include their

parents in the collegiate experience through outreach, newsletters, and increased

formal and informal interactions unrelated to financing college or fundraising;

and 3) first-generation participants were more likely to express gratitude to their

parents and to credit their parents with their personal and academic successes,

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[86] The way students spoke of their parents' role in their education offers important and nuanced insights into the differences between first- and continuing generation students. For instance, some continuing generation participants even disclosed that their parents, as graduates of the same college, had specific advice about choice of majors because of the reputations of each academic department. Some parents visited the campus regularly and knew their children's professors by name. The difference between the role of these students' parents and first-generation students' parents, who have no relationship with the university let alone individual professors, is stark. However, this is the subject of another study, and only briefly addressed here for policy suggestions.

and in this way they critiqued an implicit message that attending an elite university either created or revealed some fundamental difference between themselves and their family members.

When asked what the university could do to support the parents of their students, continuing generation participants most commonly asked that the university either do nothing or help them to explain to their parents that the choices they make—especially with regard to a liberal arts education and pre-professional planning—are their own. In other words, if continuing generation participants wanted assistance from the university, it was to separate from their parents as they shaped their futures. First-generation students wanted to bring their parents along with them into their futures, despite challenges in translating academic majors and scholarly concepts to parents with little to no familiarity with college.[87] Participants suggested first-generation parent guidebooks, newsletters, phone calls, and e-mails in English, Spanish, and Chinese. They explained how their parents, some of whom had never heard of the university before their children were granted admission, were now avid followers and fans of their children's *alma mater*. While first-generation participants expressed a range of actual parental involvement (some parents traveled regularly to visit

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[87] It is important to note the actual range in first-generation parental familiarity with college occluded by this statement. A few first-generation parents in our sample were familiar with college, had themselves attended college without graduating, or were the children of college-goers (that is, a few first-generation participants in our sample were the grandchildren of college graduates).

their children, while others had not yet seen the college; some parents regularly read the newsy e-mails delivered about campus life, while others expressed no time for such frivolities), generally speaking they hoped the university would assure their parents that they were safe, that the choices they were making were good choices, and that their time away from home would prove "worth the effort."

For those first-generation participants whose parents felt included by the college, that parental inclusion assisted their own social adjustment. Even low-cost symbolic efforts, when well conceived, were appreciated. The newsletter with a first-generation student story, the phone call home to a concerned parent in the family's native language: these inexpensive trust building efforts paid off in family support and students' increased satisfaction. But socially insensitive activities such as admitted students parties hosted at the local country club or a parents weekend that focused on fundraising or selling college paraphernalia, often set the stage for alienation for both parents and their children. Indeed, those first-generation participants who rated their social experiences low (2-6 out of 10) also told of witnessing their parents' alienation during admitted students' parties, move-in day, parents' weekend, or other official university events that appeared not to have them or their children in mind. Parents' negative

experiences with the college indicated to their children a lack of true care for them as students.

Pre-College Connections

Another unanticipated factor in our first-generation participants' social satisfaction was the extent of the student's pre-college connections of particular kinds. These included family, high school, and college preparatory connections. An older sibling attending a similar type of college, or the same college, offered the strongest source of social easing.[88] If not a sibling, then another relative or older friend from home could offer similar advice and social comfort during the transition to college. Near peers from the same high school served as informal mentors, especially for those traveling large distances to attend college. They were not as durable a connection as siblings, but they offered temporary easing at the start of college. Other pre-college connections included participation in a college preparatory program such as the federally funded *TRIO* programs, the non-profit private school network *Prep for Prep*, nearby university summer programs funded through local scholarships, and the college admissions partnership *Quest Bridge*. Students who participated in these programs often reported having mentors outside of the university they could turn to for social

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[88] Approximately 15% of the first-generation participants in our sample had older siblings who attended the same or a similarly selective university and who offered specific advice and support to their younger sibling in the process of transitioning to college. Almost all of these participants reported high social satisfaction.

and academic advice, as well as pre-college exposure to the college context to ease the transition. Participants in these programs generally reported higher social satisfaction than those with no pre-college connections.

While it may be obvious that participation in these organizations may ease the academic transition to college, it is no less important that they ease the social transition as well. That these pre-college connections support social satisfaction may be an additional argument for ongoing and increased relationships between university admissions offices and these (and similar) organizations. On an individual level, first-generation students with these connections may experience greater social satisfaction because they see people like them thriving in college and grow to believe it is possible for them as well. Near peers in their siblings, high school classmates, and these national networks may form informal cohorts of students from similar backgrounds supporting one another both academically and socially. In turn, as these networks expand students who take part in them will form an invaluable pipeline for future cohorts.[89]

Post-College Plans

Finally, senior first-generation participants who had a clear idea about their post-college plans were more likely to offer high ratings for their social

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[89] The *Posse Foundation* is fashioned on this model as well, but neither university in this study was a member of their network. Other similar colleges may discover that *Posse* scholars are also more likely to express high social satisfaction with their college experience, but this study cannot speak to that.

experiences in college. Of course, there are multiple possible reasons for this.

Students who rate their social experiences highly were also likely to be more

integrated into the university and therefore were better able to take advantage of

pre-professional opportunities offered by the university. They were also more apt

to cultivate a wide friend network that may assist with their post-college

planning. Or, as a *halo effect*, having a job offer or a plan for post-graduation

during senior year may mitigate personal anxiety and incline participants to rate

their overall college experiences high.

Regardless of the cause, it is clear that having an idea about post-college

plans is associated with general social satisfaction with one's college experiences.

Those first-generation participants who did not know what they would be doing

after graduation (approximately 25% of the sample) may have benefited from

earlier and ongoing post-graduate planning. The benefits that would accrue from

a diverse career counseling integrated into the academic departments may not

only be academic but also social.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In this chapter I explored how first- and continuing generation students

talked about their social experiences in college, particularly related to how well

they felt integrated into their university's overall structure. In general, both first-

and continuing generation students reported high levels of social satisfaction, particularly by their senior year. First-generation participants described greater and more frequent fluctuations in their social satisfaction over time, but through involvement in extracurriculars and building friend groups they fashioned supportive and rewarding communities they believed would sustain them beyond graduation.

First-generation participants were more likely to express concerns about social and personal integration, to express fears regarding belonging, and to offer solutions to university administrators about how to improve social life on campus. Continuing generation students were more likely to discuss issues related to open social spaces and sexual assault on campus, or were inclined to report no social challenges while in college. Given these findings, what are some ways that administrators and campus leaders can support positive social outcomes for first-generation students and indeed all students? In addition to the recommendations offered in Chapter 4 (many of which, like *early intervention*, *pre-orientation*, *high impact practices*, and *fixing the pipeline*, may also assist improved social experiences and satisfaction for first-generation students), below are a few recommendations based on this chapter's findings:

Study Abroad. For those students who experienced a positive social turnaround between sophomore and senior year, interviewers asked what factors

assisted that turnaround. One surprise response was study abroad. Leaving and

returning to campus often provided a fresh perspective on aspects of campus life

—especially the pressure to fit in—that were initially stressful. First-generation

participants who studied abroad often described their decision to do so as a

surprise. They did not anticipate studying abroad before they enrolled in college,

and they did not expect the experience to have as profound an impact on their

lives—in terms of redefining their purpose, passions, and identity—as it did.

This "high impact practice" should be encouraged among first-generation

students, who nationally participate in study abroad at lower rates than their

continuing generation peers. It has multiplier effects on their social lives upon

return, and assists their social satisfaction with the college and with their peers.

University-sponsored first-generation programming. Having the university

host workshops, ongoing first-generation specific events, and networking and

career advancement opportunities would afford first-generation students with

the message that their university considers their needs and is supportive of their

personal development. Providing funds for student-led efforts and helping to

organize student events sends the message that the university listens to its

students and respects the diversity of their pre-college experiences while seeking

to include everyone into the campus experience. This kind of programming

could occur in a variety of contexts. At Harvard, this study found the dispersed

style of programming to work well when associated with students' residence halls, the advising office, and with the student-led FGSU. At Georgetown, the GSP provides a model for other campuses seeking to establish a more centralized first-generation-specific program office. This study did not find that one or the other model is more effective or of higher quality; rather, valuing the human capital involved in the planning and executing of such programming, and providing financial support to ensure its success, is the key to student satisfaction with such efforts.

Ongoing Opportunities To Tell One's Story. Formal and informal opportunities to tell their stories in relation to their experiences before and during college may normalize the first-generation experience for first- and continuing generation students alike. Having near-peers tell younger students about their fears entering college and early missteps can grant permission for first-generation students to ask for advice and assistance early and often as a tool of success rather than a sign of weakness.[90] Also, it allows first-generation students to see and interact with students like them, as they are often invisible to each other in the dorm rooms or classrooms. Participation by faculty and administrators who were themselves first-generation would likely also be beneficial, but the profoundest impact will likely come from near-peer stories.

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[90] *See* Stephens et. al. (2015, 2015) for the results of experimental research indicating that participation in this kind of short-term activity improves academic and social outcomes as much as one year after participation.

These activities should include all students, but the choice to tell one's story in public should always be voluntary. As this study demonstrates, many first-generation students may not be comfortable disclosing their personal biographies in public, but they too may gain insights and inspiration by hearing those of other first-generation peers.

Parental Involvement. Increased communications with first-generation parents that are not related to financial aid or fundraising may help first-generation students to feel more included on campus. Their parents, too, will feel more included. Despite a lack of of specific academic knowledge or knowhow with regard to the college going process, first-generation parents often play a crucial role in their children's integration into the college. They offer support, guidance, and cheerleading from afar— they are the boosters, as one observer recently put it, in "the invisible row of bleachers" behind each of these students. But inclusion of first-generation parents must be conducted in ways that respect their personal biographies, too. Some parents do not read e-mail, and so any materials such as flyers, pamphlets, and guidebooks should be sent by mail. Language can be a barrier, so translation into the most common home languages of first-generation students is recommended. Fundraising to support parent trips to campus for orientation and graduation would be beneficial, and first-generation liaisons (either students or recent alumni) could organize workshops

and social events for fellow parents to ask questions, trade advice, and make personal connections with one another.

First-generation students often worry that through their elite education they will grow increasingly distant and disconnected from their families. But including parents in ongoing communications and activities by the university sends a powerful message that both they and their students are valued by the institution in the same way it values continuing generation students and their parents. It sends the message that when they entrust the futures of their children to the university, first-generation parents are, in some ways, becoming a part of the experience. And as one first-generation participant suggested, it says that they too belong with the institution: "Information from the institution, credibility that they care about the family, that these too are *Hoya* families…They may not have had their grandparents go to Georgetown, but they are having their first grandchild go to Georgetown and they are special in *that* way. They are *Hoyas* in that way."[91]

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[91] Agnes, 2015

Chapter 6:
Reflections on Four Years of Research And a Look Ahead

In this interview- based four-year longitudinal study I have compared the self-reported preparation levels, academic and social experiences, and insights concerning college-related successes and challenges of one hundred and twenty-six first- and continuing generation college students attending two elite universities. These students have repeatedly demonstrated that they are highly competitive, motivated, and invested in the assumption that an elite education confers certain advantages—academic, social, pre-professional—over less selective post-secondary options. Many first-generation participants and some continuing generation participants in this sample mentioned and emphasized (without prompting) that their attendance at a highly selective university provided them with the opportunity for accelerated social mobility post-graduation. Low-income students, particularly first-generation participants,went farther than this. They emphasized that their elite education would equip them with the means to transform their home communities, thereby driving social change beyond individual lives and families.

Understanding these motivations and presumed capabilities (based on the selective admissions standards at each university) of first-generation students,

and comparing them to their continuing generation peers, I asked whether first- and continuing generation students, in general, experienced their selective university in a similar or different fashion. I also asked what conditions supported first-generation thriving, and what factors served as barriers to continued success as defined by the students themselves. Findings from this study indicated important variation within the first-generation sample, as well as a pattern of variation and overlap between first- and continuing generation students. Moreover, the narratives of first-generation participants suggested multiple pathways to thriving on an elite campus, including for those who arrive feeling less well prepared for college. Several lessons emerge from this research that allow us to explore the possibility of future developments in student life based on new policies and programs at Harvard and Georgetown. These point to potential future directions for the "first-generation" student classification and identity on increasingly diverse elite university campuses.

Lessons Learned

On Preparation.

Pre-college preparation matters. It is not enough to be the valedictorian of one's high school to ensure that one is prepared for an elite college. Participation in a thriving high school community—one with resources for advanced

coursework, peers motivated to attend college, and teachers who are well equipped and supported—prepares first- and continuing generation students alike for the transition to college coursework. However, a higher proportion of first-generation students did not describe their high school communities as such. Instead, a large minority of first-generation participants explained that their high schools did not regularly send graduates to selective colleges, that their teachers were overworked and under-resourced, that their peers were unmotivated toward academics, and that funds to provide advanced coursework were often sorely lacking.

As such, there was a significant difference in the self-assessed preparation levels between first- and continuing generation participants in our sample (see *Chapter 2*). As sophomores, almost half (44%) first-generation participants reported feeling less prepared for college than their peers, while one in five continuing generation participants reported similarly. That discrepancy increased by the participants' senior year, to over half of (57%) first-generation students reporting feeling less prepared for college and one in five continuing generation students reporting similarly. The most common reason offered for this downward reassessment was that these participants were unaware of the skills, attitudes, and habits that they lacked upon matriculation but came to view their preparation in contrast to their peers as they participated in increasingly

challenging tasks (e.g. junior tutorials, prize competitions, senior theses, fellowship and graduate school applications). These participants were nonetheless motivated to "catch up" through intentional alterations in their academic habits (increasing the hours they spent studying, attending office hours and seeking faculty mentors), but these actions were largely viewed as trade-offs in social life that their better prepared peers were not required to make.

Among first-generation participants, women, under-represented minorities (African-American and Latino/a), and public school graduates were all more likely to report feeling less well prepared for college than males, white students, and graduates from private high schools. Variation in self-reported preparation by high school type, as well as open-ended responses to interview questions, revealed that high school experiences and high school quality affected both first- and continuing generation participants' assessment of college preparation. High school type may be more important than first-generation status itself when predicting self-assessed college preparation. However, first-generation participants who reported feeling less well prepared for college also discussed feeling surprised to discover that their high school did not adequately prepare them for their elite college. By contrast, continuing generation students who reported feeling less well prepared for college entered assuming that their high school did not adequately prepare them. They described a level of

awareness regarding the rigor of their high school experiences, and the kind of

preparation for college that their high school targeted, that first-generation

students did not report. That level of surprise among first-generation

participants led to further complications, especially when they experienced early

academic setbacks. They often interpreted these setbacks as signs they did not

belong, whereas similar mishaps among continuing generation students were

interpreted as evidence they should alter their study habits or seek further

academic assistance.[92]

While there were significant differences in self-assessed preparation

between first- and continuing generation participants, those first-generation

participants who reported feeling as or more prepared than their peers provided

valuable insight into the factors that led to a smooth transition from high school

to college. These included high quality high school experiences, individual

teachers or mentors who supported their academic goals, the presence of high

school peers who were also motivated to attend selective universities,

opportunities for extracurricular leadership, participation in college preparatory

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[92] As discussed in Chapter 2, the difference in the level of surprise between less prepared first-generation and less prepared continuing generation participants, coupled with the fear among first-generation students that early setbacks indicate they do not "belong" at the elite university, may indicate a kind of *stereotype threat* among first-generation students (Steele, 2010). For the purpose of this study, however, the important takeaway is that intentional messaging that first-generation students *do* belong, along with specific strategies for successful assistance-seeking before problems arise, could help incoming first-generation students to avoid the shock of early academic upsets and not interpret them as signs of an "admissions mistake" but as evidence to change study tactics.

programs beyond school, and the encouragement of supportive parents.[93] For these first-generation participants, college preparation was not a cause for concern. They did have advice for first-generation peers who entered college feeling less prepared: seek friendship and support networks among a diverse group of college peers, attend office hours regularly even when you have no immediate questions or concerns in the course, and participate in study groups well before challenges arise.

Asking for help early and often was a strategy for success among first-generation students who reported feeling as or more prepared for college. By contrast, first-generation participants who reported feeling less prepared for college were hesitant to seek academic or personal assistance during their first two years in college. They joined study groups late (or elected to study alone) or attended office hours only after receiving poor mid-term grades. As such, they struggled in isolation or in the company of similarly less well prepared peers. However, when first-generation participants found mentors among academically successful near-peers, they tended to alter course and implement strategies leading to improved academic outcomes.

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[93] Indeed, most first-generation participants credited their parents for their academic successes, even those who reported feeling less well prepared for college. Also, regarding high quality high school experiences, it was not always the students from the highest rated schools that reported high quality experiences. For some first-generation students who attended above average but not necessarily top-rated high schools (e.g. *Great Schools* ratings of 6-8 on a 10 pt. scale), the combination of motivated peers, advanced courses, and dedicated teachers provided the environment for high quality college preparation.

These findings indicate that well prepared first-generation students could model strategies for success by acting as peer mentors and community builders, as seen in the peer mentorship program at Georgetown's GSP and Harvard's PAF (peer advising fellows) program. Developing pre-orientation programming for students from high schools with fewer resources may also assist those students who enter college feeling less well prepared. Likewise, attention to encouraging students to make friends across a range of students is equally important to fostering positive social and academic experiences in college. These findings also suggest—from the vantage point of individual students having made the journey from under-resourced high schools to an elite college—the importance of ongoing national discussion concerning the social value of investing in public education, particularly in low-income communities. Clearly, a strong pre-college academic foundation—and making friends with peers from a variety of academic backgrounds—is one pathway to thriving for first-generation students attending highly selective colleges.

On Academic Experiences.

At the outset of this study, I wondered whether students who entered college feeling less well prepared than their peers would also report lower academic satisfaction and a less robust academic experience than their peers who

arrived in college feeling as or more prepared. This study indicates that this is not the case. While first-generation participants were more likely to report changing their academic major and were also less likely to complete academic capstones such as the senior thesis as compared to their continuing generation peers, they also reported similar levels of satisfaction with their academic experiences and similar kinds of academic products they believed would prepare them in their post-college work lives (e.g. internships, laboratory work, creative products, computer programming portfolios, etc). Comparing less-prepared and more prepared first-generation students, there is also no clear pattern of difference in terms of academic satisfaction. Students who reported high levels of satisfaction with their academic experiences tended to identify meaningful relationships with faculty, the completion of challenging assignments (e.g . a thirty-page paper, a short feature film, a computer program design, etc.), and a high sense of community among peers and faculty in their department. Those who reported lower levels of satisfaction often asserted that they felt unsupported in their desired field of study or their major. This was the case for first- and continuing generation students, as well as participants reporting feeling as prepared and less prepared for college. In short, lower satisfaction with academic experiences did not appear to be correlated with preparation levels or

first-generation status; instead, it was associated with feeling supported in one's major of choice.

Academic preparation did not appear to impact college academic choices as much as one might expect. Instead, first- and continuing generation students from a variety of preparation levels elected to follow trajectories begun in high school or to diverge from high school academic pathways at similar rates. Whether they were satisfied with these academic choices was conditioned upon their perceived self-efficacy in these choices. If participants, especially those who reported feeling less prepared for college, considered their academic choices as ones they made on their own volition rather than as a result of foreclosed preferred options, then they reported high levels of academic satisfaction. This finding suggests that more opportunities to explore academic options early, even in high school, would support students' informed choices and improved satisfaction with academic choices later in college.

Another lesson from this study involved the common narrative theme of a dramatic arc in academic accomplishments among first-generation students. First-generation participants who reported feeling less prepared for college were more likely to describe significant academic turnaround between freshman and senior year, whereas continuing generation and well-prepared first-generation participants narrated their experiences in terms of ongoing academic

achievement. Academic turnaround was viewed as an enormous

accomplishment and source of pride, while ongoing academic achievement was

described not as a major success on its own as much as one issue in college-going

that was not of significant concern. On a similar theme, one frequently described

"academic success" among first-generation participants included proving to

themselves that they were "smart enough" to succeed in their college's

competitive environment.[94] Attaining the confidence to speak up in class or to

talk with an esteemed professor outside of class—these were significant

accomplishments that first-generation participants raised that were not an issue

among most continuing generation participants. The theme of an academic

turnaround was an important aspect of first-generation participants' narrative of

success on campus. It indicated a second pathway to thriving, fueled in part by

students' motivation to overcome initial setbacks, but also by modeling strategies

suggested by academically successful peers, reaching out to professors and

teaching assistants for help and support, and working to overcome specific

academic deficits through individual effort, peer assistance, and faculty

mentoring.

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[94] Or, as Salvi put it in Chapter 4, "proving to myself that I'm not dumb."

On Social Experiences.

One goal of this study was to discern whether, and if so to what extent, first-generation and continuing generation students travel distinctive social pathways upon matriculation at an elite college. In this manner, this study follows the research agenda of sociologists exploring how students' social class backgrounds affect their higher education experiences and outcomes (e.g. Aries, 2008; Stuber, 2011; Aries & Berman, 2012; Armstrong and Hamilton, 2013; Hamilton, 2016). But by focusing on first-generation status rather than social class per se, this study allows for greater flexibility regarding the importance of social class identification and the narration of one's social class background. It hypothesizes that the outcomes may be different when first-generation status rather than social class is the criterion of classification.

First-generation participants reported greater variation in their social experiences on campus — with a common theme of peaks and valleys in social life, and punctuated experiences of belonging and isolation — than continuing generation participants reported. First-generation participants reported similar rates of satisfaction with their overall college experiences to their continuing generation peers, but their narratives of college-going indicated that they dealt with more challenges both on and off campus and expressed higher levels of gratitude and joy alongside anxiety and loneliness in college.

First-generation participants spoke of the challenge of affording to participate fully in campus life (including affording books, academic supplies, and dormitory supplies[95]), of having to send money home to families in need, of the fear of financial setbacks or surprise expenses, and of general lack of financial literacy. This was a common set of issues addressed by both low- and middle-income first-generation participants. These were not topics raised by continuing generation students in general.

There were other topics raised by both first- and continuing generation participants, indicating shared concerns across a spectrum of personal circumstances. For instance, both first- and continuing generation participants spoke of the need to improve mental health services on campus, to reduce the competitive nature of extra-curricular organizations, to foster more inviting open social spaces, and to improve the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities on campus. First- and continuing generation students alike identified forming a wide network of friends and developing a meaningful commitment to at least one extra-curricular organization as their greatest social successes on campus. Personal connections mattered a great deal to both groups: and both groups underscored the importance of a diverse network of friends and associates. Given the overlap in most discussions regarding social life on campus, it

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[95] Although at Georgetown, dormitory supplies were provided to all GSP members, many of whom spoke of this gift as alleviating initial worries about financing the transition to college.

appeared that the primary identifiable difference between first- and continuing

generation participants concerned finances.

However, this did not automatically indicate that first-generation students

self-identified as low-income, "poor," or "working class." As a group, they

framed their socio-economic backgrounds within a range from low- to middle-,

and in some cases high-income. They adopted different stances toward

disclosing their first-generation status, from *bulwarking* (where they associated

primarily with students from similar backgrounds), to *pride work* (where they

advocated for greater awareness within the campus community), to *assimilation*

(where they assumed the habits and style of the dominant social group). They

made individual calculations regarding to whom they would share their

background, whether they would allow better off friends to pay for their meals

or evenings out, and how they would raise money in a financial emergency. In

short, first-generation participants arrived on campus with varying levels of

financial literacy, resources, and strategies, and then made complex decisions

about how they would attend to and disclose their financial needs to their peers.

They also self-identified by class status in different and often ambivalent ways,

highlighting the liminality, or "betwixt and between" condition of their current

social position (see Turner, 1964; see also Wildhagen, 2016).

The pathways to thriving through the "experiential core"[96] of an elite

college education included making friends from a variety of backgrounds,

committing an extra-curricular organization preferably early in college, and

eliminating financial barriers to participation in social life.[97] Beyond these issues,

first-generation students chose to craft their social lives in disparate ways. The

findings from this study do not indicate significantly different levels of

satisfaction with social experiences between first- and continuing generation

participants, nor do they suggest that first- and continuing generation students

as groups have distinct or dissimilar social experiences in college. College

administrators and staff should be aware of the financial hurdles to full

participation in social life for many first-generation students attending elite

colleges, but they should be equally cognizant of the different choices in self-

disclosure and identification with the first-generation classification that first-

generation students make while in college.

Looking Ahead

Programs and practices designed to support first-generation students at

Harvard and Georgetown have evolved over the four years (2012-2016) included

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[96] See Stevens, Armstron, & Arum (2008) as cited in Stuber (2011).

[97] The first two findings are consistent with those found in Light (2001).

in this study. At Georgetown, more concerted efforts have been made to increase

the volume and scope of the GSP's offerings, as well as increasing the number of

its undergraduate members. Fundraising goals have been established to endow

and expand the program as well. The office has created programs such as the

"Sophomore Strong Summit" to combat sophomore slump, "Achieve Advisers"

to connect near-peer mentors with first-generation students who may require

extra academic assistance, and the "GSProud" social media campaign to share

stories of success and overcoming challenges among first-generation students.

They have expanded their emergency fund, internship stipends, summer and

inter-term housing options, and holiday meal programs. They have partnered

with Ann Taylor LOFT and Joseph A. Bank Clothiers to host "shopping events"

where GSP students can select professional attire to prepare for interviews and

internships. They operate as liaisons to other offices, making medical

appointments for students in crisis or calling the financial aid office on behalf of a

student. They also interface, when appropriate, with the academic deans and

increasingly with faculty who are interested in becoming involved with GSP. The

staff discuss what a "GSP House" would like like, and whether it would model

itself after Georgetown's "Black House." Looking ahead, it appears that the GSP

is consolidating its mission and authority in the realm of guidance, support, and

organizational management of Georgetown's first-generation students. It is

becoming a model of the "one-stop shop" for the various needs that first-generation students may have on an elite college campus.

Harvard, too, has evolved in how it supports first-generation students over the past four years. It advertises its long-standing winter coat fund; provides funds for low-income parents to attend commencement; has modified its orientation and peer advising programs; incorporates new approaches to faculty advising that consider students' high school and community background;[98] has established a First-Generation Program through the Office of Admissions and Financial Aid; and most recently, has announced a $2,000 freshman start-up grant for students whose parents' income is under $65,000. This three-year pilot program is designed to eliminate financial barriers to exploring Harvard for first-year students. Harvard's approach has been to provide a robust network of varied formal and informal outlets for supporting first-generation students. It will now offer direct funds that students themselves are responsible for allocating. This approach to supporting first-generation students is distinctive from Georgetown's "one-stop shop," but potentially no less effective in its outcomes.

As this study indicates, the centralized and dispersed approaches to fostering student success among first-generation and all students may both

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[98] For comparative analysis on different advising approaches for low-income students at three elite universities, see Bernstein (2009).

support successful outcomes; to be fruitful, the strategy must align with the mission of the college, include personnel who are committed to its success, and be supported both financially and in practice by the larger university. First-generation advocates are also beginning to articulate their challenges and outline solutions for their universities to mitigate or altogether eliminate the barriers to inclusion on elite campuses. Looking ahead, it will be important to track how well these current approaches to supporting first-generation students fare over time, and what lessons may be learned regarding the implementation of these latest programs.

Finally, students' own adoption of the "first-generation" classification and identity is evolving. At the outset of this study, few undergraduates at Harvard and Georgetown proudly disclosed that they were "first-generation." In the first two years of this study, one reason offered for their hesitance was that students believed the first-generation label also conferred a kind of disadvantage or presumed a deficit on the part of the bearer. More recently, though, "first-generation" has become a label of pride as students discuss their varied family backgrounds and pre-college experiences in their student-led organizations, at multi-institution conferences, and in the national press. As more students foreground their experiences as first-generation who also win prizes, attend graduate school, or meet with professional success, the symbolic meaning of

"first-generation" will presumably no longer call to mind an automatic deficit narrative.

It is still unclear whether the first-generation identity will gain the salience that racial, ethnic, or religious identity holds for college students. It will be important to follow these students' and their younger peers' adoption of the classification in future years. Is this "more than a moment," (*IvyG*, n.d.) as one first-generation mantra advocates, and if so, to what purpose will students mobilize around this new shared identity? The "first-generation" classification holds the potential to transcend both racial and social class barriers, and as a category it both honors parents' backgrounds and offers a narrative of educational aspiration that reinforces the idea of equality of opportunity that lies at the core of American liberalism. As such, it is a classification that could unify many interest groups on campus.

Appendix A: **A Note On The Limitations of This Study**

The analytic scope of this thesis is limited by the sources of its data. First, interviews are widely understood to be interactive performances between the interviewer and participant, and not opportunities to open a window into the participants' lives as they are lived (Ebron, 2002; Rodden, 2013; Khan and Jerolmack, 2013, 2014). This is the case with this project as well. Both first-generation and continuing generation students arrive with agendas--regarding the university and how it can be improved, and regarding their own self-representation of their time in college--and these agendas shape both the kind of information received and the scope of its analysis. As mentioned in Chapter 2, interviewers on this project worked diligently to build rapport and to allow the students to take the interview in whatever direction they deem appropriate. But the fact remains that the interview best captures students' evaluations of their experiences and not necessarily the experiences themselves. Should student experiences themselves be the object of interrogation, then direct and participant observation would usefully flesh out the interviews, as well as conducting interviews with a more comprehensive array of stakeholders—faculty, staff, and

administrators who come in contact with these students (Khan and Jerolmack, 2013).

Likewise, while the interviewers worked to maximize rapport with their participants, they cannot change features of their identity to make students feel more comfortable or to speak more candidly. While it was not part of the interview protocol to ask students how they felt about the interview process itself, it is possible that some students responded to their interviewers based on features of their presumed identity. For instance, I am not a first-generation college student, and so I could not speak as an "insider" with my interlocutors. This limitation was mitigated by the fact that other interviewers involved were first-generation alumni. Moreover, some research indicates that a combination of insider/outsider interviewers, like the make-up of the interview teams involved, actually enhances qualitative research (Louis and Bartunek, 1992; Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013).

Finally, the interview process is affected by the nature of the rapport developed and the power dynamic negotiated between the interviewer and the participant. Students tailor their responses based on the relationship they feel they have with the interviewer, as well as via synecdoche the relationship they feel they have with the university. At times, the interviewer may stand in as "Harvard" or "Georgetown," while at other times, both the interviewer and

participant view "Harvard" or "Georgetown" as a third party concerning them both. And interview participants may dissimulate for a host or reasons when asked personal questions, so responses are best read not as "what happened," but rather as "how students wish to share what they remember and how they evaluate what happened." Given the nature and goals of the research questions, this limitation is also not a serious concern.

Appendix B: **Sample Interview Protocol**
First-Generation Sophomore Protocol AY 2013-14

We are interviewing you as a first-generation college student, whose parents didn't graduate from a four-year college. We're particularly interested in your freshman year experience: your transition to college, your preparation for college, your academic experience, your social experience, and your parents' experience during your freshman year. We'd like to hear about the high points and the low points, your biggest successes and your biggest challenges, and we're hoping you can give us some advice about how our campus leaders can best support first-generation students.

Overall Transition

1. Thinking back to your transition to college last year, what do you remember as the easiest part of your transition, and what was the most challenging part?

2. Is there one thing in particular that made a big difference in the quality of your freshman year?

3. Based on your experience, if you were going to advise our campus leaders to do one specific thing to help first generation students have a good freshman year, whether personally or academically, what would that be?

Academic Preparation

4. Compared to other freshmen here, do you think you were generally academically more prepared, as prepared, or less well prepared for college?

5. How would you rate your specific preparation in math, compared to other freshmen here? (more prepared, as prepared, or less well prepared)?

6. How would you rate your specific preparation in writing, compared to other freshmen here? (more prepared, as prepared, or less well prepared)?

7. Was there any other academic area in which you felt significantly more prepared or less well prepared? If so, what was it?

Academic Experience

8. Were the attitudes and study techniques that you found successful in high school successful for you in college? Did you need to make a lot of changes, some changes, or only a few changes to the way you work? Please describe. (*prompt if student does not understand question 8: for example, the way you take notes or study for exams or come prepared to classes)

9. Did anyone in particular help you as you learned to "navigate" this campus? If so, who? [Examples of replies: faculty member, freshman proctor, academic adviser or administrator, an older student]

10. If you needed a recommendation from someone for a summer job or internship or fellowship, do you have a specific person you could ask and whom you believe knows you well enough? If so, who is that person? [Examples: faculty, teaching assistant, academic adviser, administrator, or person from home]

11. Was there a time when you needed academic assistance during freshman year?
(If answer to 11 is "yes," follow up with: "please describe that time. Did you feel comfortable asking for assistance, and did you know where to go to get it?")

12. Academically, are you doing anything differently with your work this year (sophomore year) as a result of your freshman year experience? If so, what?

13. Based on your experience last year, if you were going to advise our campus leaders to do one specific thing to help first generation students have a positive academic experience, starting in freshman year, what would that be?

14. On a 1-10 scale where 10 is terrific and 1 is truly disappointing, how would you characterize your overall freshman year academic experience?

Social Experience

15. Did you participate in a pre-orientation program? If so, which one, and to what extent do you think that participating in a pre-orientation program was important to your social experience here?

16. Were you a member of any extracurricular groups last year as a freshman? If so, which ones? [Make list of: number and type (social or pre-professional)]

17. For any extracurricular groups you might have been involved in, how would you characterize your level of involvement? Would you say you were not particularly involved, somewhat involved, or very involved?

18. As a freshman, to what extent did you feel like you were fully a part of the campus community? [Possible scale: rarely, sometimes, usually]
(If answer to 18 is negative, follow up: is there anything that campus leaders here could have done to help you feel more fully a part of the community?)

19. Based on your experience last year, if you were going to advise our campus leaders to do one specific thing to help first generation students have a positive social experience, what would that be?

20. On a 1-10 scale, where 10 is terrific and 1 is truly disappointing, how would you characterize your freshman year social experience?

Parental Involvement

21. How often are you in contact with your parents (talking on the phone, texting, or emailing) while you are here on campus? [List as: daily, weekly, monthly]

22. Did your parents give you any kind of academic advice about choice of courses, academic concentration, or summer plans last year? Please explain.

23. If you were going to advise campus leaders to do one specific thing to support the parents of first generation students as they transition to college, what would that be?

Final Question

24. We are trying to better understand the experience of first generation students here, and to find ways to better support all such students. Are there questions

we didn't ask you, or topics that you would like to bring up or discuss before we end?

Appendix C: Sample Interview Protocol
Continuing Generation Senior Protocol AY 2014-15

Individual Interview Guide: Control Group Seniors
For Academic Year 2014-15

We interviewed you two years ago about your freshman experience at Harvard, and we are now re-interviewing you about your entire experience, now that you are a senior. We'd like to ask you, in retrospect, about your academic and social experience at Harvard as well as your parents' experiences. We'd like to hear about the high points and the low points, your biggest successes and your biggest challenges, and we're hoping you can give us some advice about how our campus leaders can best support students.

Academic Preparation

1. Thinking back on your time at Harvard to date, how well do you think your high school prepared you for college academically? Do you think you were more prepared, as prepared, or less well prepared than your peers?

2. Looking back, do you think your level of high school preparation affected your course choices at Harvard? If so, how?

Academic Experience

3. Thinking back on your time at Harvard to date, what have been some of your greatest successes and what have been some of your greatest challenges in terms of academics?

4. What are you most proud of having accomplished academically so far?

5. Has your approach to academics changed between freshman year and now? What, if anything, do you do differently now as a result of your early experiences?

6. During your time at Harvard, was there a time when you needed academic assistance? If so, did you seek the assistance you needed? (If so), where did you seek it and did you get the support you needed?

7. Who were your most important teachers and academic advisers at Harvard, either formal or informal? [code: ladder faculty, house proctor or tutor, academic adviser or administrator, other student]

8. What are you concentrating in? How satisfied are you with your concentration experience (very satisfied, satisfied, neutral, not satisfied, very dissatisfied) and why? Was the concentration you chose similar to or different from what you had in mind when you first came to college?

9. Are you writing a thesis this year? Why or why not?

10. If you needed a recommendation from someone for a job or graduate school, do you have a specific person who you could ask and whom you believe knows you well enough? [code: ladder faculty, house proctor or tutor, academic adviser or administrator, other student]

11. Based on your own experience, if you were going to advise our campus leaders to do one specific thing to help students have a positive **academic** experience at Harvard, what would that be?

12. On a 1-10 scale where 10 is terrific and 1 is truly disappointing, how would you characterize your overall academic experience at Harvard?

Social Experience

13. Thinking back on your time at Harvard to date, what have been some of your greatest successes and your greatest challenges in terms of social life?

14.   As you look back on your time at Harvard, what extracurricular activity or activities were the most important to you? Name up to three and explain what your role was in those activities and why they were important (code: comp or non-comp)

15. To what extent did you feel like you were fully a part of the Harvard community? [Scale: rarely, sometimes, usually] (If answer to 15 is negative, follow up: is there anything that campus leaders here could have done to help you feel more fully a part of the community?)

16. Was there ever a time when you needed support or help with your personal or social life while in college? If so, did you seek out the support you needed? (If so) where did you seek it out and did you get the support you needed?

17. Based on your experience at Harvard, if you were going to advise our campus leaders to do one specific thing to help students have a positive **social** experience, what would that be?

18. On a 1-10 scale, where 10 is terrific and 1 is truly disappointing, how would you characterize your overall **social** experience at Harvard?

Post College Plans

19. Do you know yet what you will be doing right after college? If not (reassure that that's totally normal in the fall!), what is your best guess?

20. What do you expect to be doing five years from now? 10 years from now?

Parental Involvement

21. On average, during your time at Harvard, how often were you in contact with your parents (talking on the phone, texting, or emailing) while you are here on campus? [List as: daily, weekly, monthly]

22. To what extent, if at all, did your parents give you academic advice during your time at Harvard, about choice of courses, academic concentration, writing a thesis, etc? Please describe.

23. To what extent, if at all, did your parents give you social advice during your time at Harvard, about friendships or romantic relationships, extra curricular activities, etc? Please describe.

24. How involved, if at all, are your parents in your decisions about what to do after college? (very involved, involved, not very involved)

25. If you were going to advise campus leaders to do one specific thing to support the **parents** of students at Harvard, what would that be?

Final Questions

26. Should Harvard offer a summer or pre-orientation program to help some entering freshmen hit the ground running? Why or why not? [If yes, what should be taught in this program and for whom should it be organized?].

27. We are trying to better understand the experience of students here, and to find ways to better support all such students. Are there questions we didn't ask you, or topics that you would like to bring up or discuss before we end?

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