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WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS?

Imagine yourself as a college or university professor, pulling together materials for class prior to the beginning of the new academic year. Before the first day of class, a colleague in your department takes you aside and challenges you to conduct a mental experiment in your class, whereby you are to make note of the various characteristics of your students—all in their first year—and categorize them demographically based on nothing more than a visual scan of the lecture hall and a survey of the names on your roster.

You would probably be able to claim with some degree of certainty that this particular student would self-identify as African American, that one as Asian American, and another one as biracial. Where you are unsure about the accuracy of your initial impressions, you might triangulate the rough collection of data by consulting the roster of students, which might help you make further tacit assumptions about ethnic background or ancestry—this one Irish, that one Italian, this one Latino, that one Jewish, this one African but not American, and so on. A further review of physical phenomena and items on display—clothing, hairstyle, electronic equipment and other technologies, books, and backpacks, for example—may tell you still more about social class and economic status. And of course, speech and communication patterns might provide clues as well.

Confident in your ability to intuit demographic characteristics based largely on visual analysis, you present your findings to your colleague, only to be given another challenge. Employing the

same coarse data-gathering methods in your next class, he says: “Can you identify the students who represent the first in their family to attend college, or even to have some level of direct exposure to the college experience? That is, who among those in your class are first-generation students? How would you know, and why would it be important to know?”

Obviously you wouldn’t know, certainly not by appearance alone. Nor would you ever know unless the students announced their status outright. And because most students don’t—there may be nothing compelling them to do so—they tend to remain anonymous on most campuses. Nor, at present, is information on first-generation students likely to be systematically gathered or disseminated at the various administrative levels, and it is only marginally covered in the current research and literature. And, one may ask, why should the subject of first-generation students be addressed? Why should campus administrators and faculty pay special attention to such students as they enter college?

Preparing for college marks the beginning of a long journey through the educational pipeline. As intuitive and manageable as it may seem to some students, it is confusing and daunting to others. For first-generation students in particular, who typically have far less exposure to higher education than their non-first-generation peers, the college campus might seem like a foreign place. They may feel like frontier explorers who have entered a complex wilderness, equipped with their belongings and a lot of good wishes behind them but largely on their own.

Perhaps the famous passage by twentieth-century social anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1964) best captures the sentiments of the ambivalent and apprehensive traveler newly arrived in a strange location. Describing his initiation into ethnographic fieldwork on the South Coast of New Guinea, he reflects:

Imagine yourself suddenly set down surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village, while the launch or dinghy which has brought you sails away out of sight . . . Imagine

further that you are a beginner, without previous experience, with nothing to guide you and no one to help you. (p. 4)

There are critical questions about the college experiences of first-generation students that need to be answered, and administrators and faculty members ought to gather information about first-generation students' needs, goals, values, and readiness for college. First-generation students are thus a population whose identity is largely hidden on our college campuses. Until these students either announce themselves as first-generation students, self-identify on questionnaires and surveys for the purposes of institutional- or national-level research, or become identified through participation in such campus programs as new student orientation, they may remain hidden.

First-generation students need to be more visible to educators, and they require a unique support system to prosper and succeed in college. Researchers, educators, and practitioners alike must increasingly focus on these students to learn more about their preparedness for college, their social and academic needs, and their expectations. This book, although it offers recommendations for making campuses more responsive to these learners, ultimately attempts to broaden the knowledge base on the significant issues and challenges first-generation students face. It is designed primarily to stimulate discussion among scholars and practitioners and to help them reexamine their efforts in meeting the needs of this population.

Defining First-Generation Students

A quick scan of the literature reveals a rift when it comes to the definition of the term *first-generation student*. Neither definition—"a student for whom neither parent attended college" or "a student for whom neither parent attained a baccalaureate degree"—is right or wrong. However, this distinction does have serious implications in administrative matters and in creating appropriate

learning environments for the students in question. For one thing, depending on the definition, the number of individuals classified as first-generation students will vary. Those planning services and allocating resources must take note of which definition they are using.

The first-generation student concept was initially used as an administrative designation to demonstrate student eligibility for federally funded outreach programs for disadvantaged students, such as TRIO (Auclair et al., 2008). TRIO, a broad-based American higher education initiative stemming from the Higher Education Act in the early 1960s, encompasses three major educational opportunity programs, including Upward Bound (1964), Talent Search (1965), and Student Support Services (1968). TRIO defines first-generation students as *all students whose parents have not obtained a postsecondary degree*. More recently, others have used a stricter definition: *those for whom neither parent attended college*. Naturally, defining first-generation status such that it applies to students for whom neither parent earned a baccalaureate degree would elevate the number of first-generation students identified in any particular institution or research study, whereas defining first-generation students as those for whom neither parent attended college would deflate the number.

What is more, students whose parents did not attend are generally less prepared for the college experience than students whose parents attended college but did not necessarily receive a degree. Because the level of preparedness is a critical factor in the success of any student, the distinction represented by these two definitions is important: colleges attempting to reach, teach, and nurture first-generation students will find it takes more effort to do so with students for whom neither parent attended college.

The First Scholars Program of the Suder Foundation (www.firstscholars.org/), the only national-level organization whose sole mission is to provide scholarship funding and support for first-generation students, defines first-generation students as those whose parents have no education beyond high

school. We agree with Ishitani (2006) and Choy (2001) that any amount of college education received by the parents of first-generation students is an important factor in how they view and experience college, and thus we concur with the Suder Foundation's definition. To better understand the importance of this distinction, consider the following examples of individuals who might be classified as first-generation students by some, but not by us.

Student A enrolls in a community college. Each of her parents possesses an associate's degree. A broad definition of first-generation status, which encompasses those students for whom neither parent completed a four-year degree, would suggest Student A is a first-generation student. We suggest, however, that she is not. Her parents not only attended college but also graduated from college—and they are quite familiar with the type of institution she is attending. Most important, her parents' experiences as college students have endowed them with relevant and sufficient cultural capital (which we describe in the next section) needed to communicate with, inform, and influence their daughter and to prepare her for the college experience.

Student B's father attended a four-year institution for several semesters. He was successful there, but dropped out for personal reasons, for instance family medical reasons. According to researchers with broader definitions, Student B, who is attending a four-year institution as well, is also a first-generation student. Yet this student's father possesses enough relevant cultural capital to pass on to his son to prepare him for the college experience. For example, 2009 Heisman Trophy winner Sam Bradford left the University of Oklahoma after his junior year (without a degree in hand) to play football professionally in the NFL. In the future his children should not be considered first-generation students; they will not have been deprived of the cultural capital that college graduates are presumed to possess.

Although the two definitions will affect the lens through which the college or university views first-generation students,

ultimately the focus of their efforts is the same: to identify the first-generation students entering the institution, to recognize their unique needs and expectations, and to support their experiences so they will have the greatest likelihood of success. Thus we make arguments and recommendations here that can apply to all institutions and all first-generation students, defined strictly or broadly. In doing so, this information will be relevant to all institutions, no matter how they conceptualize their work and define first-generation status.

Cultural Capital and College Students

The key construct in the experience of first-generation students is *cultural capital*. Cultural capital was described originally by Bourdieu (1973) with respect to differences in educational outcomes by persons of differing socioeconomic status. Parents transmit cultural capital to their children by passing along information and beliefs needed to succeed in the school environment. For college students, cultural capital is not acquired in a short time (in the manner that artifacts or money might be); rather it is acquired over time as a result of exposure to the experiences, attitudes, and language of the parents. Thus, with respect to the higher-education setting, cultural capital is the value students gain from their parents that supports and assists them as they navigate the college experience and seek a higher social status and greater social mobility (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995). Alfred Lubrano (2004), in his book *Limbo* about the intersection of “blue-collar roots” and “white-collar dreams,” describes acquiring cultural capital as “growing up in an educated, advantaged environment [learning] about Picasso and Mozart, stock portfolios and crème brûlée . . . where someone always has an aunt or a golfing buddy with the inside track for an internship or some entry-level job” (p. 9). Cultural capital represents the education and advantages that a person accumulates, which elevate his or her capacity to fit into higher social strata; it provides students

with the means to ensure social mobility. Although there is no single, best direct measure of cultural capital, much of the existing research addresses the disparity in knowledge pertaining to college life between first-generation and non-first-generation students and the influence the gap has on persistence (see, for example, Berkner & Chavez, 1997; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Unfortunately, first-generation students receive relatively little cultural capital specific to higher education from their parents, who by definition have little or none of it to give. First-generation students lack much of the capital that their non-first-generation counterparts enjoy because their parents do not possess the information, familiarity, jargon, cultural understanding, experience, and emotional bearings that the students need to effectively tackle the challenges of the college environment (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Oldfield, 2007; Purswell, Yazedjian, & Toews, 2008; Schultz, 2004; Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995; Sundberg, 2007). These parents may want their children to go to college and do well, and some may have a sense that doing well requires great effort, but there are few details from lived examples that these parents can share with their children to help them in that quest. London (1989) and others who have studied the social and educational dynamics of being the first in one's family to attend college have concluded that this lack of cultural capital leaves first-generation students without an accurate sense of what they must do to be successful in and out of class and is often a precursor to lower academic achievement and failure to attain a degree.

Specifically, cultural capital includes the knowledge students and their families have about the variables involved in getting into college (for example, researching institutions, making informed decisions, applying to schools, locating financial resources, developing expectations, and learning the language and terminology of college life) and persisting in college once there (for example, locating campus-based resources, developing

friendships and social connections, learning how to navigate the academic curriculum, participating in campus activities, and making progress toward graduation). Cultural capital is therefore the key factor in shaping the experience of first-generation students. It highlights why the ways in which a campus shapes learning experiences for first-generation students may vary by how the term *first-generation student* is defined: to define a first-generation student as someone whose parents do not have a baccalaureate degree reduces the value of cultural capital as an ingredient in how students experience college.

We concur with Davis (2010) and others that the lack of college-related cultural capital is a major impediment to success for first-generation students because such cultural capital provides a critical, intuitive orientation to the college experience. However, defining first-generation students as only those whose parents have not earned a four-year degree, as Davis does, is misleading and contradictory. Certainly, the more experiences parents have, and the longer their duration of college attendance, the more cultural capital they accumulate and can pass on; but a four-year, degree-earned metric seems to devalue cultural capital. Cultural capital relevant to college attendance is not obtained only when a parent graduates from college; it is obtained when a parent acquires significant and meaningful college experiences—going through the admissions process, experiencing freshman orientation, interacting with faculty, doing college-level work, being self-directed, learning the language and customs of higher education, living with other students, taking finals, navigating the library, making decisions about majors and career pathways, developing help-seeking skills, and so on. A person accrues cultural capital pertaining to college while attending college; it is a cumulative process. The institution does not grant cultural capital to its students on the same day it grants a degree. And although non-college-educated parents and their children can obtain knowledge about college through many means (such as over the Internet), a parent who has *experienced*

college—even partially so—has more wisdom to pass on than someone who has only read or heard about it.

In a related sense, parents also pass along to their college-attending children varying degrees of encouragement and support. As will be demonstrated in later chapters, first-generation students often receive lower levels of encouragement and support than their non-first-generation peers. In fact, parental encouragement (with respect to their attitudes toward education and general support of the college-going process) is in some ways more important to persistence than family income in shaping student success. Parental involvement in the college decision-making process (Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999) and support during the transition into college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004) is lower for first-generation students than for their traditional peers, leaving already underprepared students with fewer resources to draw on when they are needed most. However, offering parental support means more than just supplying cultural capital; it involves engaging in decision making, asking pertinent questions, providing financial resources, and giving basic encouragement. According to Purswell, Yazedjian, and Toews (2008), first-generation students usually know that their parents care about their accomplishments, but insufficient parental engagement combined with insufficient cultural capital can be a barrier to their success.

Significance of Inquiry into First-Generation Status

As Hand and Payne (2008) explain, “First-generation students are an often overlooked, marginalized group. However, because they don’t look different from other marginalized groups, such as Hispanics or African-Americans, they often aren’t perceived as needing help and so don’t get it” (p. 12). First-generation students, by any definition, have been present on our campuses since the founding of higher education in America; but now

there is a critical gap in going to college between first-generation students and students whose parents preceded them to which we must attend. And because we have expanded our interest in helping *all* students succeed—not just the elite majority or the best prepared—and have made higher education more accessible to diverse populations, more first-generation are students arriving at our doors (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). More knowledge about their unique circumstances is required if we are to educate them effectively.

The number of first-generation students enrolled in American colleges and universities has been reported over the past thirty years to be anywhere from 22 percent to 47 percent (Choy, 2001), depending on the definition used. Those levels have varied slightly with time, but the overall number is trending higher, at both two-year and four-year institutions (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Strayhorn, 2006). Enrollment information on the nation's college-going population is used in Table 1.1 to frame the discussion of first-generation student characteristics and needs (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). In the table, the numbers under each column represent the percentage of students corresponding to each postsecondary enrollment characteristic. The total for each section in each column is approximately 100 percent, or the sum of students who can be described using that heading. As we can see from the table, compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation students are

- More likely to select a two-year college as their first institution of choice
- More likely to delay postsecondary enrollment
- More likely to have interrupted enrollment (experience discontinuous enrollment) in a postsecondary institution
- More likely to have part-time enrollment status

Table I.1 Generation Status of College-Bound High School Seniors, 1992–2000 (by Percentage Distribution of Selected Postsecondary Enrollment Characteristics)

Postsecondary Enrollment Characteristics	All Students	First-Generation Students	Students Whose Parent(s) Had Some College	Students Whose Parent(s) Had a Bachelor's or Other Higher Degree
<i>Type of First Institution</i>				
Four-year institution	57.4	40.3	48.8	76.3
Two-year institution	40.6	54.9	49.2	23.3
Less-than-two-year institution	2.0	4.8	2.0	0.4
<i>Time Between High School Graduation and Postsecondary Entry</i>				
Less than one year	85.8	78.3	82.8	93.2
One to two years	6.8	10.0	7.3	4.5
More than two years	7.5	11.8	9.9	2.4
<i>Continuity of Enrollment</i>				
Continuous	67.0	51.7	63.7	79.1
Stop-out after three years of continuous	3.7	3.3	4.1	3.4
Discontinuous	18.0	24.4	19.2	13.1
Indeterminable	1.1	1.6	1.4	0.6
Enrolled for less than one year	10.2	19.0	11.6	3.8
<i>Enrollment Status</i>				
Always full-time	62.7	55.5	60.3	69.4
Part-time at least at one institution	37.3	44.5	39.8	30.6

Note: Details may not sum to 100 percent because of rounding.

Source: Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000.

Access to College: The Beginning of the Pipeline

As with any minority population or student subculture, not all first-generation students share the same characteristics or experiences, and not all enter college in need of targeted support.

However, first-generation students as a whole can be accurately described as lacking important precollege characteristics and experiences that their non-first-generation counterparts are more likely to have, putting this group in a challenging position. The characteristics of first-generation students—their entering qualifications, aspirations, engagement in learning and campus life, academic achievement, personal growth, persistence, and graduation from college—frequently set them apart from non-first-generation students. It is important to note that although this book will examine first-generation students broadly as a group, we do not consider such a group to be in any way homogeneous. In fact, first-generation students may also be described in other terms—in relation to race, ethnicity, social class, and family income, for example—that have a bearing on their engagement, learning, and persistence. However, because first-generation students can be understood as distinct from non-first-generation students based on variables (such as grade point average, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and so on) that are important to enrollment managers, faculty, and student affairs practitioners, we will describe them generally within the context of those distinctions.

We continue to learn how to differentiate among racial, ethnic, religious, and gender groups, not as a way to isolate or deny them access but as a means of understanding and better serving them. To the extent that a group of students differs from what was once the campus norm, we attempt to become more adept at creating academic and social interventions that provide a more productive and satisfying experience for them, thus influencing the degree to which they engage in educationally purposeful activities, achieve desired learning and developmental outcomes, and persist in their enrollment until graduation. However, because individual first-generation students are not readily identified and may cut across all or some of the aforementioned groups, we often have not afforded them such attention.

Basic Differences Between First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students

David Onestak, director of counseling and student development at James Madison University, likens a first-generation student to an athlete always playing an away game. For a minor-league baseball player on a long road trip, the unfamiliar bed, lack of home cooking, unusual daily routine, absence of local supporters, and unfamiliar ballpark surroundings can be a source of stress and an impediment to success on the field. Imagine if that road trip lasted for nine months. After a while the unfamiliar may become recognizable, but it never feels like home. First-generation students, especially those in their first year of college, may feel like they are on a road trip that never stops; that every day is full of potential barriers to success that are the price of being the first in their family to attend college. If that price feels too steep, or if there is no one in a student's family who can assure him or her that the eventual payoff is much greater than the price, the idea of even being in college may be overwhelming.

In the course of making these early evaluations, first-generation students must grapple with a variety of tough questions about themselves, their reasons for attending college, and the challenges of their new environment:

- What will the entrance into the world of the educated require me to sacrifice with respect to family, friends, and identity?
- What can I potentially achieve that will make my parents happy?
- How will I find my way in this new environment, physically and socially?
- How, if I reside on campus, will I adjust to living among others whose educational, financial, and family backgrounds have prepared them better for that experience?
- Will my parents' lack of education be an impediment to my fitting in here?

- What do I wear, what do I do when I'm not in class, and what will others expect me to be? Will others know by looking at me or talking to me that I am a first-generation student? Should they or I care?
- Will I be able to talk to other students and to faculty? Will they reach out to me, or will I need to reach out to them?
- Who will be my role models, now that I am in this strange place?

Each of these questions signifies the vast uncertainty that faces many first-generation students as they embark on their college education. And each illustrates that first-generation students differ in a variety of ways from their traditional peers, both in their preparation for and vision of higher education and in their experience at college.

Precollege characteristics are useful in understanding individual students' and groups of students' readiness for the academic, social, and emotional demands of college. Examples of meaningful precollege characteristics include demographics (for example, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and family structure); the nature and quality of the student's high school education; and courses taken and grades achieved. First-generation students differ from their non-first-generation peers in regard to a variety of demographic variables, including being widely represented in disadvantaged racial, income, and gender groups, thus occupying "intersecting sites of oppression" (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005, p. 409). First-generation students are more likely to be minority students (Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Terenzini et al., 1996); students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bui; Oldfield, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996); and women with children (Nunez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996). Table 1.2, which has been adapted from many studies of first-generation students, compares students' reasons for pursuing higher education and their experiences during the first college year. A mark in the "Similar" column indicates where

Table 1.2 Comparison of First-Generation and Non-First-Generation Students

Area of Interest	Similar	Different
<i>Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education</i>		
Friends were going to college.	✓	
Parents expected me to go to college.	✓	
High school teachers and counselors persuaded me to go to college.	✓	
Wanted a college degree to achieve my career goals.	✓	
Wanted the better income a college degree provides.	✓	
Like to learn.	✓	
Wanted to provide a better life for my own children.	✓	
Wanted to gain independence.	✓	
Wanted to acquire skills needed to function effectively in society.	✓	
Wanted to get out of my parents' neighborhood.	✓	
Did not want to work immediately after high school.	✓	
<i>First-Year Experiences</i>		
Felt less prepared for college than other students.		✓
Worried about financial aid.		✓
Feared failing in college.		✓
Knew less than other students about the social environment at the institution.		✓
Felt I had to put more time into studying than others did.		✓
Felt comfortable making decisions related to college on my own.	✓	
Knew about the academic programs at my institution prior to enrolling.	✓	
Made friends at my institution.	✓	
Enjoyed being a student at my institution.	✓	
Felt accepted at my institution.	✓	

Source: Adapted from Bui, 2002; Choy, 2001; Horn & Nunez, 2000; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Nunez, Cuccaro-Alamin, & Carroll, 1998; Oldfield, 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996.

first-generation and non-first-generation students were much alike in regard to their reasons and experiences, whereas a mark in the "Different" column indicates that reasons and experiences were not alike.

In terms of the academic pipeline, it is well-established in the higher education literature that first-generation students are

much less likely than their peers to enroll in a postsecondary institution; and it follows that they are also less likely to persist to graduation once they do enter college (Engle, Bermeo, & O'Brien, 2006; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Engle and Tinto point out that first-generation students are much more likely to earn a bachelor's degree if they enter postsecondary education at a four-year institution than if they enter at a two-year college, but that annually only about 25 percent of first-generation students do so. Given that approximately three-fourths of all first-generation students enter higher education at two-year institutions—at which retention rates have traditionally been the poorest for many groups of students—these numbers are troubling. Although the two-year sector provides perhaps the best opportunity for first-generation students in terms of access and equity, the path to attaining a baccalaureate degree has greater challenges for students who enter two-year institutions as opposed to four-year institutions. In addition, the percentage of first-generation students who enter two-year institutions and eventually go on to earn a bachelor's degree is five times higher for such students who are not economically disadvantaged, as many first-generation students are (Engle & Tinto). This latter point demonstrates that the influence on bachelor's degree attainment of where first-generation students start their college education—at a two-year or four-year institution—can be moderated by family income.

Across all demographic categories, first-generation students arrive at college campuses at risk academically. As a result of their high school experiences, they are less academically prepared than their traditional counterparts. Overall, when compared to non-first-generation students, first-generation students tend to have lower reading, math, and critical thinking skills (Inkelas, Daver, Vogt, & Leonard, 2007) and pursue a less rigorous high school curriculum, especially in the sciences and math (Choy, 2001); they are less likely to take SAT and ACT exams, and AP courses and exams; and they typically achieve a lower grade point average in high school (Brown & Burkhardt, 1999; Riehl, 1994). This

lack of preparedness for college often is correlated with lower socioeconomic status and parental support, and it shapes the expectations of first-generation students.

First-generation students have lower educational aspirations than other college-bound students (Bui, 2002; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Miller, 2008; Terenzini et al., 1996). Even students who possess high levels of academic ability frequently select institutions that are less academically rigorous than their intellectual capabilities would suggest they can handle (Inkelas et al., 2007; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak and Terenzini, 2004; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). In general, first-generation students simply do not imagine themselves reaching the same academic heights as other students, and when they are motivated to attend college it is often for more practical, short-term reasons than those motivating non-first-generation students (Prospero & Vohra-Gupta, 2007). For example, they believe that they have more at stake by attending college than do their traditional peers, who may take college attendance for granted; they are more attuned to potential financial gain from college; and they often see a college degree as the best way to help their family (Bui, 2002). These aspirations and motivations frequently are shaped by students' familial support system. For instance, first-generation students are more likely to be dissuaded from attending college by their parents, many of whom are more fearful than the parents of non-first-generation students about their children leaving home or entering a new culture (Schultz, 2004).

Voices of First-Generation Students

In order to capture some of the unique perspectives of first-generation students, we interviewed a few of these students during their first year at a large public university. These interviews were revealing and enlightening in that they gave human voices to complement previous research on first-generation students. Many students talked about the picture they had of college before

matriculating, illustrating some common fears but also displaying unique perspectives on the decision to attend college. (The names of these students have been changed to ensure their anonymity.)

Steven spoke honestly about his reluctance to go to college, thinking that it wasn't necessary. His parents were largely absent from his decision, so he first turned to his grandmother:

My grandmother didn't go to college, and she's really smart, so I didn't think at first it was necessary, but then I decided college would provide for a better life. Once I got here I thought I was going to drop out, that it would be too hard for me, but I found out that my professors do want to help me.

Family attitudes toward college were frequent topics of discussion as students responded to questions about the role their family played in the decision to attend college. Tameka described some parental hesitation, but also some later parental encouragement and engagement:

My mom didn't want me to quit my job to go to college, but she eventually understood and let me go. My parents really didn't know much about college, but they made an effort to find out things at the same time I did, I think so they could help my younger siblings when they want to go one day.

Clayton, however, was not as sanguine about his parents and the role they played, illustrating with his comments the potential impact of inadequate cultural capital and conflicting family expectations:

My family helped me do my application, but I could tell they expected me to drop out because my sister did. I felt I needed to prove them wrong. I guess they were supportive, but they didn't help me either. They didn't seem to care until they helped me move in on the first day.

The idea of wanting to prove parents or others wrong was a common theme with the students we interviewed. This emotional perspective served as a durable motivator for many of the students, as described by Ray:

My mom and dad never went to college, and I want to do good for them, even though my dad doesn't really care if I do well or not. I want to prove that I *can* go to college and graduate.

In another interview, describing his parents' attitudes once he began classes, Clint remarked:

I wish they understood that college is harder to manage and that I am trying to manage a lot of other things at the same time. They think I am lazy when I have free time or take a nap because I am exhausted.

Similarly, Andrea described her parents as supportive and proud, but lacking in understanding about the expectations of the university and the behaviors needed to succeed:

Now that I'm here my parents are more encouraging, but they just don't get what I'm doing. I'm a big girl now, I'm doing what I need to do to get stuff straight for my life. But my family doesn't realize how hard college is. I feel like if I fail I'll really disappoint them, but they don't know how to help me not fail. I know they will be there when it counts, but it's not like they can help with my schoolwork. They think I'm partying a lot; they don't understand that I miss them.

Most of the students interviewed expressed dismay that their parents just didn't understand the amount of effort it took to do well in college and earn the respect of others. Whether or not the parents were supportive and encouraging, most of them

could not help their child adapt to changing academic and social expectations. And many were like Tamara's parents, who had a difficult time letting their daughter escape the clutches of home life:

I'm a hometown kid, and my parents really wanted me to go to college, though they did say I was on my own moneywise. Living at home with parents who don't get the whole college thing is tough. I wish they understood that I need time to do homework, I can't be hanging with the family all the time the way I used to. My parents will want all of us to go somewhere, and my mom will say, "Oh, you can do your work when you get back; I'll help you." But she can't. And I need the time. They don't think about me getting my homework done.

These are but a few of the ways that first-generation students describe their unique circumstances. The outlooks of the students we interviewed were typical of what one might expect to find in the first-generation student population: excited and fearful, hopeful and realistic, underprepared and determined. They were aware of their status, aware of their lack of parental wisdom, and driven by the need to prove to themselves and others that they could succeed in ways that no one in their family ever had. And, like most first-generation students, they arrived at a disadvantage, they lacked the confidence that their traditional peers enjoyed, and they were uncertain of just how far a college degree would take them. It is then, at that arrival, that the real work of nurturing success within this fascinating and deserving group of students begins.