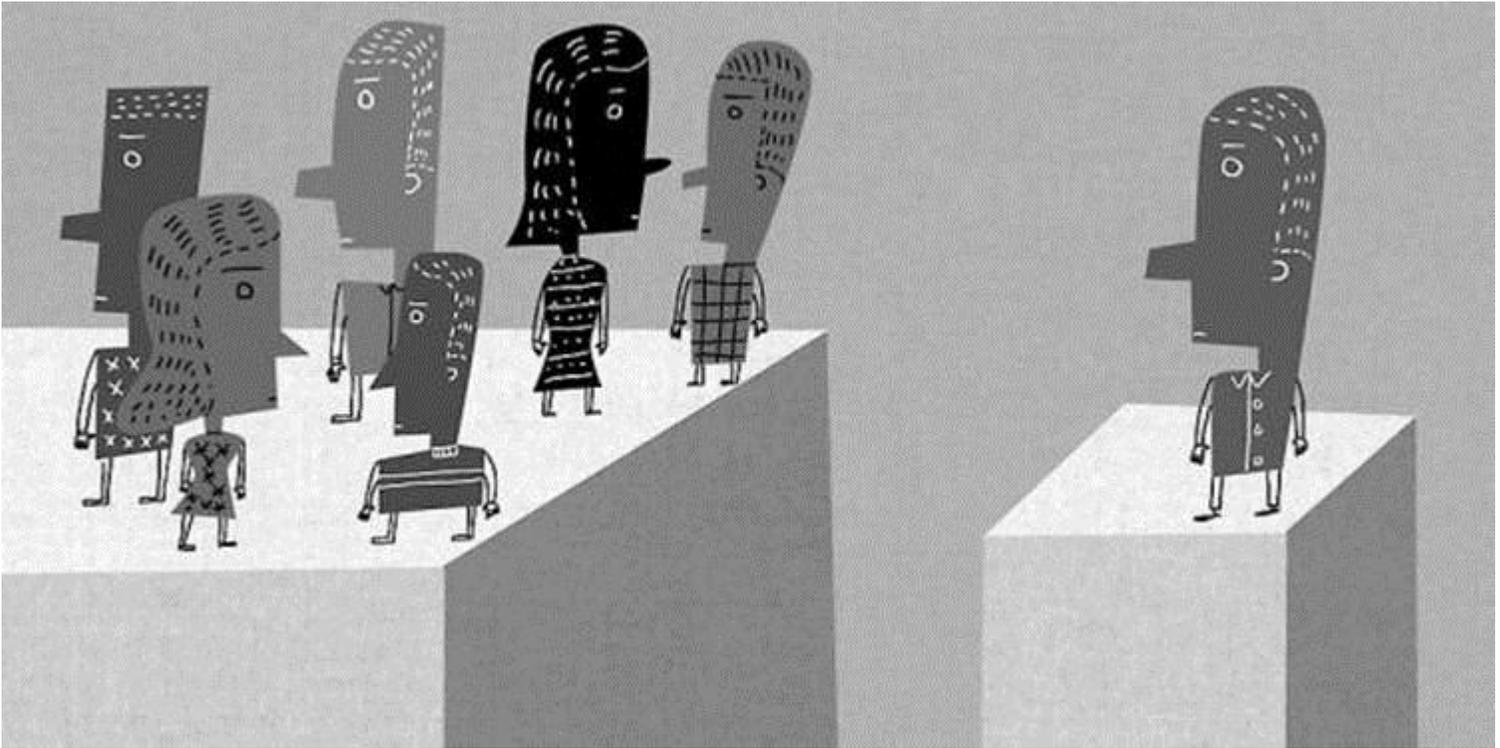


## Think of First-Generation Students as Pioneers, Not Problems



*James Yang for The Chronicle*

*By Richard Greenwald*

Too often these days, we in higher education simply aren't doing enough to support the efforts of students who are the first in their families to attend college. These students, many of whom are working class, get brushed aside by concerns about budgets and enrollments, the sheer busyness of a college, their own passivity, and our assumptions that all students share similar experiences and preparation. It is time to see them for who they are and act on their behalf.

A 2007 study by the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles found that nearly 17 percent of entering freshmen were first-generation college students. At the time, higher education celebrated their inclusion, as well as our ability to provide need-blind admissions and financial aid. These students were our success stories; we all pointed to those who, with our help, had pulled themselves up and out. They became part of the story we told about our missions.

Fast-forward to today, when one in three students is first generation. We know the challenges these students face: financial, personal, emotional, social, and educational. While most of them attend public colleges, where they are sometimes the majority, many will be and are already going to private colleges, too. There is a simple reason: the numbers. With a decline in the number of students going to college, institutions are struggling to maintain

enrollment. So while many colleges in the past would only skim the cream off the top of this group, fiscal need now requires that they dip more deeply. And as we enroll more of these students, we need to rethink our approach.

Are we ready, willing, and able to serve them? The evidence says no. More than a quarter of these students don't make it past the first year, and almost 90 percent don't graduate within six years. We are failing them. It is time that we make a concerted effort to better understand and support them.

I know something about this because I was a first-generation student. Like many others, I had little guidance about the college process. For me, it was a high-school English teacher who told me I should go to college. So off I went to a nearby CUNY campus, while most of my friends took civil-service exams for the police, fire, and sanitation departments. I lived at home, worked 20 to 30 hours a week, and thrived, bumps and all.

If we want more first-generation students to thrive today, we need to understand what makes them unique.

To start, they don't possess the social capital needed for college success even if they have the academic preparation (which many don't). Many don't know how to debate without arguing, where the boundaries are in the classroom, and what behavior is appropriate. They may have poor time-management skills. Therefore they often appear disrespectful, unfocused, and lazy when they really aren't.

Many of them also don't understand the idea of majors and instead think of them as career choices. They shy away from, say, philosophy because they don't know what to do with it. I became an accounting major for just that reason. When I switched to history, my father asked, "What are you going to do with that?," and at the time I didn't fully know the options.

In addition, sometimes they think in purely transactional terms. They don't see college as a journey—no matter how much you tell them it is—because they don't have that luxury. They work too many hours at menial part-time jobs and often have little familial support or even slightly dysfunctional home lives. Most of all, they have this odd sensation of betrayal. You see, coming from a blue-collar family gives you a certain worldview and grounding that education upends.

Education exposes you to differences, new ideas, new creative endeavors, and opens you up. It makes you vulnerable and rootless for a while, something that is not a common blue-collar trait. In working-class communities, vulnerabilities may be seen as a sign of weakness that is to be avoided or at least hidden. Many first-generation students don't know how to process such things as criticism of work they have done, and they respond by joking about it, ignoring it, or taking it personally.

We need to see first-generation students as the pioneers they are. In the 1990s, I wrote an essay that called the experiences of blue-collar academics "border crossing," with a foot in each camp or class. First-generation students not only cross the class border but can translate cultures, too. We shouldn't expect them to choose between their past and the promise of the future, or make them ashamed of where they come from.

I remember looking scornfully at my parents (a unionized communications worker and a receptionist) as they had a conversation with my undergraduate mentor at graduation. I was afraid they would embarrass me. I still can see the look on my father's face go from pure pride to sadness, and the shame of that moment is still fresh.

I wanted to transcend being blue collar, and college opened that door—but it also taught me to be ashamed of where I came from. The working class was a good subject of study, but not a living, respectable population. I was taught to transcend my past, to leave it behind. But you can't leave it behind. I was who I was, and my past and my family inform who I am now.

So what should we do? First, those of us who were first-generation students must stand up and make our presence known. We should act as ambassadors, guides, and advocates for current first-generation students. We need to find ways to educate these students in the social aspects of college.

That means that our seminars for first-year students need more open and frank conversations about social expectations as well as what developmental tools are necessary. We need to offer workshops on college rules without stigmatizing the students who attend. In short, we need to write up the unwritten rules of college for them.

I was luckier than many of our first generation today. I didn't fall through the cracks. I used to think there was something special about me, buying the Horatio Alger myth about bootstraps. But I now know that I was just plain lucky. And luck shouldn't have anything to do with it. We owe it to our students to take luck out of it—that is the power of higher education.

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