DEFYING THE ODDS: FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS AT
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT
The availability of high paying jobs that can be acquired without a college degree is decreasing with each passing year. This forces young adults who may not have considered college in the past, to contemplate a college education. These students, whose parents never went to college, had to get into school and adapt to their new environment on their own. For my study of first generation college students, I looked at American University, a four year private school in Washington, D.C. I interviewed twenty-one first generation college students and asked them who/what encouraged them to pursue college and what their transition experience was like. The major finding was that a majority of these students were encouraged to pursue a college career by their parents. They also felt that their college experience was harder than second generation college students because their parents could not comprehend what they were experiencing.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Getting an advanced educational degree is becoming a very important part of American society. The number of good paying jobs that are available to those without college degrees are decreasing. There is a simple solution to this problem—go to college, but this is not as simple as it may seem. For young adults whose parents did not attend college it is a lot more difficult. Those students whose parents did not graduate with a Bachelor’s Degree, or first generation college students, often feel lost about how to start the process. When most students are thinking about going to college they simply ask their parents or relatives about their college experience. They might even have grown up with the expectation that they would one day go to college. In other words, it was already decided for them. For students whose parents did not go to college they are often unsure of what needs to be done in terms of taking appropriate classes, standardized testing such as the SATs, and how to really prepare to go to college.

In Christopher Jencks’ book *Inequality: a Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (1972), he states clearly that “We know that some high-status occupations exclude people who lack educational credentials. We also know that some individuals stay in school not because they enjoy school, but in order to enter high-status occupations” (182). So are first generation college students going to school because they have found, like many generations before them, a love of learning and expanding the mind or is it just for economic purposes? It has been shown year after year a college
degree translates to higher paying jobs. According to the 2005 Annual Social and Economic Supplement released from the Census Bureau a person who graduated with a high school diploma will make an average of $30,640 a year whereas a person who graduated with a Bachelor’s Degree from a four year college or university will make an average of $53,581 a year. That is almost a 75% difference between the two amounts. Although it is getting harder to find a good paying job without a college degree, in my research I will try to find out why first generation college students decided to come to college in the first place.

Jencks (1972) goes on to say that fathers pass down status to their sons. It is clear that parents who have high status, i.e. those with a college degree, would pass on the value of higher education to their children. He argues that if you were to measure all the non-cognitive influences on a child it would be greater than the cognitive skills (180).

With the importance of getting an advanced degree increasing with every passing year it is important that groups that have not been considered “typical” college students are able to have access to higher education. Something that needs to be considered is that since this group of students in the past has not been considered the typical college students, they may need special programs or accommodation to help them transition and become integrated into the college environment. Are colleges doing their job and helping these students? Since first generation college students have one of the highest drop out rates, the answer would appear to be no.

The problems of first generation college students have been given a classic formulation in the title and substance of Ron Suskind’s study *A Hope in the Unseen*. 

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Cedric, the main character, is faced with the same problems that I will be addressing in my paper. He is a first generation college student, who comes from a very poor area in Southeast Washington D.C. and has no one that he can ask about what college is like. Although Cedric is from a lower socio-economic class than the majority of students that I interviewed, he was still facing the same barriers such as applications, financial aid forms, and the higher standards that are expected in college. At times he feels like he is all alone and he cannot relate to any of his classmates. He does not share the same experiences of his wealthy Brown University classmates. He lacks the cultural capital that is vital in college. What he knows, he has learned on his own, his mother does not have the skills that Cedric will need to do well in school. He must learn them on his own. This is what many of the first generation college students that I interviewed talked about, that feeling like they were on their own. They understood that there was only so far that their parents could take them; they had to go to rest of the way on their own.

The research question that I will be looking at is: What are first generation college students experiences with going to college? This would include what/who encouraged them to go to college and what their transition experience was like. With this research question I am assuming that first generation college students will have a different experience from second generation college students. I am also assuming that value that American society places on education have been internalized. When I discuss second generation college students, I mean any student whose parents have an advanced degree, they may in fact be fourth or fifth generation.

The questions that I have stated above are the focus of my research. In answering these questions, I turned to three major paradigms in sociology—Positivism,
Interpretive, and Critical—and used these paradigms to develop multiple angles of vision on first generation college students. Three concepts, one from each paradigm, guided my thinking: Robert Merton’s concept of anomie from Structural-Functionalism in the Positivist paradigm; Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s concept of “doing gender” from ethnomethodology in the Interpretive paradigm, and Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital from the Critical paradigm.

For the 2005-2006 school year there were 6,975 freshmen admitted to American University. Of those 6,975 students only 159 of them were first generation college students. Of those 159 students only 26 students decided to put down a deposit so that they could attend American University. The SAT scores of these first generation college students were slightly lower than the average American University student. First generation college students averaged 1204 SAT score compared to 1266 for the total pool of freshmen coming in.

When asked about the typical occupations of parents of students at American University the admissions office said that although students are required to provide that information, the office does not keep track of it. They simply stated that parents hold a wide variety of jobs from cashier to business people and everything in between.

When asked about the income levels of parents, again the office of admissions says that although students are required to submit this information the only reason it would come into play is if the student applied for financial aid.

One of the key findings that I discovered after interviewing 21 first generation college students at American University is that a majority of them credit their parents for encouraging them to go to college initially. Many of them said that they felt it was
expected of them. Another interesting finding that was backed up by the literature was that a majority of the students lived off campus and therefore it was harder for them to be fully engaged in the college environment.

American society places a high value on higher education. It is not only easier to get a good job by having an advanced degree but companies almost always pay employees more money the higher their degree. The prestige that goes along with these jobs and the education that is needed to get these jobs, go hand in hand.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

When starting my search for information on first generation college students there were several keywords that I used such as: first generation college student and access to higher education. From there I looked at the bibliography for articles that were helpful and searched for the articles listed.

There were several areas that I thought were important for any study of first generation college students. I wanted to find out if the background characteristics were similar for first and second generation college students such as race, age, income, etc. I was also interested in finding out what problems they might encounter such as preparation for college, and financial problems, just to name a few. Finally I wanted to know what past researchers suggested would help this group gain better access to a college education and help them better adapt to the college environment.

Background Characteristics

Many researchers, Brooks-Terry (1988) Gibbons and Shoffner (2004), Van T. Bui (2002), looked primarily at background characteristics that differ between first generation and second generation college students. Brooks-Terry (1988) found a very important difference between the two groups. Compared to many second generation college students, first generation students are more likely want to get a college degree just so they will be able to get a better job. They also found that first generation
students were more likely to live at home and work more hours per week than other college students. This does not include working on assignments for school. First generation students still had to work hard to help support their families or because their families cannot support them. Because of this, many families may not believe that college is really worth all of the time and effort that goes into it. For many of these families it is costing them a lot of money to send their child to college and they may not see the results of that education for at least four years. They felt that the young adult’s time could be better spent working instead, making money to help support a family that is already struggling. They may also worry that their son/daughter is going to change, that they are going to lose sight of where they came from.

According to Gibbons and Shoffner (2004), 27% of graduating high school seniors are first generation college students. They argued that there is a difference between the struggles that first generation college students have to deal with compared to second generation college students. They used Social Cognitive Career Theory which analyzes how career interests mature. They look primarily at three areas: self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals. Self-efficacy, for first generation college students, would be the ability of the students to set certain goals and their belief that they could actually accomplish those goals. For example, if a high school student wants to get into private four year university, he has to look at that goal and believe that he can actually achieve it. This places an importance on peers, their own self-image, high school grades and standardized test scores. The outcome expectations are learned from the student’s own personal history or others they know. Using the same example, if the student knows that no one in his neighborhood has ever gone to college or that he knew
someone who went to college but later dropped out, this could have a huge effect on whether or not he even tries to attend college. Gibbons and Shnoffner defined goals as simply, "the decision to begin a particular activity or future plan" (2004:95). In other words, to put their plans into action. All of these elements work together to help people/students decide what they want to do with their careers. With groups such as first generation students they may prematurely decide against a college career because they do not feel that they could get into a university or they may feel the costs of a college education far outweigh the benefits. Gibbons and Shnoffner (2004) encourage school counselors to help students find the career that was meant for them and to help students realize that they should not eliminate potential opportunities just because others have.

In Van T. Bui's (2002) article “First-Generation College Students at a Four-Year University: Background Characteristics, Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education, and First-Year Experiences” looked at three different groups, first generation college students, parents who had some college experience but had not graduated and both parents have at least a Bachelor’s Degree. In order to gather his data he recruited first generation college students from a program entitled, “Program Leading to Undergraduate Success” at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). He compared this group to an introductory psychology class at UCLA. Those that were chosen to participate were given course credit. Van T. Bui (2002) found that first generation college students were more likely to be ethnic minority students, 53% were Asian and 31% were Latino (8). For students whose parents both went to college the highest numbers were Asian (51%) and white (38%) (Van T. Bui 2002:7-8). He also found that first generation college students were more likely to be from a lower
socioeconomic status. First generation college students had a greater proportion of students in the poor (14%), working class (39%) and lower middle (20%) categories than second generation college students did (Van T. Bui 2002: 8). Second generation college students had high proportions in the middle middle (26%), upper middle (47%) and upper (9%) categories (Van T. Bui 2002: 8). Although both groups said that the reason they wanted to go to college was that they needed a college degree to achieve their goals, the biggest numerical difference was with the option of wanting to help their family out after they are done with college (Van T. Bui 2002: 11). Out of a scale of 1-7, first generation college students gave that goal a 6.27 whereas second generation college students gave it a 4.49 (Van T. Bui 2002, 11)

**College Experiences**

Many studies—Hertal 2002, National Center for Education Statistics 1998, National Center for Educational Statistics 2005, Naumann, Bandalos, and Gutkin 2003, Pike and Kuh 2005, and Terenzini et al 1996— not only looked at the difference in background characteristics but also looked at how their experiences in college were different from other college students. Hertal (2002) looked at a combination of variables that not only encompassed background characteristics such as parental income but also self esteem and support from on-campus and off campus friends. Although he did not find any overall distinctions between first generation college students and second generation college students, he did find that first generation college students were less successful at socially adjusting to the college environment than second generation college students. “The value of intellectual activities and pursuits predicted overall...
college adjustment significantly better for FGCSs [first generation college students] than for SGCS [second generation college students]. SGCSs tend to view college as more of a social process and put greater value on extracurricular activities in college (Hertel 2002: 14). Hertal argues that first generation college students should live on campus so that they become more engaged in campus life. Compared with Brooks-Terry (1988) who found that first generation college students were more likely to work more hours out of school than their second generation peers, Hertal did not find this. Although there was a slight difference it was not statistically significant. He also did not find any statistically significant evidence that second generation college students received more support from on and off campus friends and family.

The National Center for Educational Statistics released a report in June of 1998 entitled, “First-Generation Students: Undergraduates Whose Parents Never Enrolled in Postsecondary Education” which, like many of the other studies listed above, found that first generation college students were more likely to be older, low income, and going to school part time. The data set that they used was the 1989-90 Beginning Postsecondary Longitudinal Study which represents college students nationally in both two and four year colleges and universities. They found that 43% of incoming freshmen were first-generation college students. While looking at income they found that first generation college students’ came from lower income families 23% of the time compared with 5% for students whose parents had an advanced degree (1998:8). Although a majority of first generation and non-first generation college students are still white non-Hispanic, 76% to 82% respectively, when looking at the other categories the biggest difference is in the Hispanic category. For Hispanic students going to college 11% said that they...
were first generation compared to 5% who said that they were not. They also found that first generation college students were more likely to go to public two year schools compared to students whose parents had a Bachelor's Degree, 51.2% compared to 34.8% (1998:14). The highest percentage of students whose parents had a Bachelor's Degree went to a public four year college or university, 37.2%, whereas only 20.4% of first generation college students decided on this choice (1998:14).

It was stated earlier that first generation college students were more likely to go part time, it is important to clarify that almost 70% of first generation students are going full time but there is a big difference in who is going part time. For students whose parents got a Bachelor's Degree only 10.5% decided to go part time compared to 30.1% of first generation college students (1998:16). Another big difference that they found was the educational aspirations of the two groups. For first generation college students the highest percentage wanted to earn a Bachelor's Degree, 37.7%, for non first generation college students it was to earn an advanced degree, 58.7% (1998:10). It has often been cited that first generation college students are more likely to live off campus than their non first generation college counterparts. This study saw the same results. First generation college students lived off campus 38.9% of the time and with parents or relatives 44.8% of the time. For students whose parents have a Bachelor's Degree their highest numbers were in the on campus category with 45.3% and if they were not living on campus they lived with parents or relatives 37.2% of the time (1998:16).

First generation college students were more likely to receive financial aid than their non first generation counterparts although they did not explain why this was the case. 50.5% of first generation college students received financial aid with a majority of
it coming from grants, only 39% of students whose parents obtained an advanced degree received financial aid.

Another important variable to consider is percentage of students who work full time while at school. First generation college students were more likely to work full time then students whose parents earned a Bachelor’s Degree, 33.2% and 23.4% respectively. With regards to the future, both first generation students and students whose parents received a college degree said that what was most important to them was to “be successful in line of work” and “be able to find steady work” as their number 1 and number 2 answers (1998:22). The biggest difference came when asked about money. “Being well off financially” was important 61.4% of first generation college students compared with 47.1% of second generation college students (1998:22). When asked about personal matters that were important to them, both first and second generation college students said that they wanted to “give own children a better opportunity” as their number one option although there was an almost eleven percentage point difference between the two groups. For first generation college students it was more important with this choice being selected 85.3% of the time compared with 74.4% for second generation college students (1998:22). When asked why students picked the college/university that they did 36% of first generation college students compared to 21.9% of second generation college students said the financial aid package that they received (1998:26). When asked if the location of the college was important, 55.5% of first generation college students said that it was important that it was close to home compared to 29.5% for second generation college students. These are just a few of the variables that this study examined.
In a 2005 study by the National Center for Education Statistics entitled, "First-Generation Students in Postsecondary Education: A Look at Their College Transcripts" that was conducted by Xianglei Chen in which he found that although 28% of the 12th graders that participated in the National Education Longitudinal Study said that their parents did not have any postsecondary education but only 22% of students entering college between 1992 and 2000 said that they were first generation college students. This means that this group of students is less likely to go to college themselves compared to students whose parents went to college (Chen 2005: 5). He also found that first generation college students were less likely to finish college once they were admitted, 42% of first generation college students left college without a degree by 2000 compared to 20% of students whose parents had a Bachelor's degree (Chen 2005: 6). He also found, similar to other studies that first generation college students were more likely to be female, 60% compared to 49% for second generation college students (Chen 2005: 7). In regards to race, both groups were more likely to be white but second generation college students were disproportionally represented in this category, 64% for first generation compared to 84% for second generation (Chen 2005: 7). With regard to income, Chen again found that first generation college students were more likely to come from families that made less than $25,000 in 1991. Half of all first generation college students belonged in this category compared to only 7% of second generation college students (Chen 2005: 7). Another finding that was interesting was that first generation students were more likely to go to a two year institution first, 55% compared to 23% (Chen 2005: 10). One thing that Chen found was that 33% of first generation
college students came into school without a declared major compared to only 13% of second generation college students (Chen 2005: 12-14).

Naumann, Bandalos and Gutkin (2003) did a quantitative study of 155 first generation students at a large Midwestern university. For their independent variables, they looked at generational status, ACT scores, motivational variables, and four strategy variables. The motivational variables were “intrinsic goal orientation, task values, expectancy for success beliefs, control beliefs, and self-efficacy; and four strategy variables, study strategies, goal setting, seeking assistance from others, and time management” (Naumann et al 2003: 6). They did not go into detail about what these different questions entailed, the only information that they gave was that part of their data was collected by using the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire which measures motivational and learning strategies. Expectancy beliefs was the most significant variable predicting success for first generation students with a value of .582 followed by the ACT exam with a value of .511. For second generation students the most significant variables was the ACT exam with a value of .395. “Overall, 50 percent of the variance for GPA was predicted by the two significant variables (expectancy for success and ACT)” (Naumann et al 2003:7). She concluded that first-generation students need to rely on motivation factors

In their 2005 article, “First- and Second-Generation College Students: A Comparison of Their Engagement and Intellectual Development” Pike and Kuhn were looking at student engagement in the college experience and their integration into the college environment. They felt that these areas greatly affected learning and intellectual development. They used the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) which
consists of a stratified random sample of 3,000 undergraduates from around the country and “asks students to report the frequency with which they engage in activities that represent good educational practices and that are related to positive learning outcomes” (Pike and Kuh 2005: 282). When looking at academic engagement they studied things like library experiences, writing experiences, and how often the students interacted with the faculty. When looking at only background characteristics, gender was the only variable that had a direct relationship with “social engagement” (Pike and Kuhn 2005:284). They found that minority group membership and aspiring to an educational degree after a Bachelor’s were related to academic engagement. Living on campus was the only variable that had a direct relationship with learning and intellectual development whereas the background characteristics had an indirect effect (Pike and Kuhn 2005:285).

Of course they could not leave background characteristics out of the study. They also found that first generation students were more likely to be male and members of a minority group (Pike and Kuhn 2005: 287). This finding, that first generation college students are more likely to be male contradicts Chen’s finding that they were more likely to be female. Pike and Kuhn discovered that first generation college students tended to have lower educational aspirations than their second generation counter parts. They were also more likely to live off campus. Pike and Kuh also found that first generation college students reported less favorable perceptions of their college environments, feeling less integrated, and less engaged in the college environment (Pike and Kuhn 2005: 287). This last finding is something that many researchers have said needs to be addressed. Pike and Kuhn concluded that “low levels of engagement are an indirect
result of being the first in one's family to go to colleges and are more directly a function of lower educational aspirations and living off campus” (2005:290). In order to fix this problem they suggest that academic advisors should know exactly who is a first generation college student so that they can suggest different way that the student could get involved on campus.

Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, and Nora (1996) not only looked at background characteristics but also looked at first generation college student’s experiences. For background characteristics they found that first generation college students were more likely to come from low-income families, to be Hispanic, to have weaker cognitive skills (in reading, math, and critical thinking), to have lower degree aspirations, and to have been less involved with peers and teachers in high school” (Terenzini et al 1996: 8). On a scale of 1-4, 1 being no chance and 4 being a very good chance. They also found that first generation college students are more likely to take longer to complete their college degree than traditional college students, 2.81 and 2.55 respectively (Terenzini et al 1996: 9). There is one thing that first generation students are at an advantage; that is that when they enter college they are more likely to know what area that they want to study, 2.9 and 2.74 respectively (Terenzini et al 1996:9). This contradicts Chen’s (2005) finding that said that they were more likely to come into college as an undecided major. They found that first generation college students were more likely to take fewer classes in humanities and they also were more likely to take fewer classes in their first year than their peers. Similar to Brooks-Terry’s finding, Terenzini et al (1996) also found that first generation college students worked more hours off campus then their peers. One a scale of 1-9, one being none and 9 being more
than 35 hours, first generation college students 3.86 and traditional students said 3.05 (Terenzini et al 1996: 11). They did not give any information about how many hours that would mean for those students. They just noted that first generation college students worked more than traditional students. Although they did not go into much detail they found that first generation college students were more likely to experience some form of discrimination although this was not statistically significant at the .05 level it is still interesting. When looking at specific areas such as reading, math and critical thinking, Terenzini et al found that traditional students (students whose parents went to college) advanced more quickly in reading comprehension than their first generation counterparts did (.92 gain for traditional students compared to .45 for first generation college students) (1996:13). When taking background characteristics into account the variance in critical thinking scores explained 63% of the variance (Terenzini et al 1996:15).

Preparation for College

There were several studies—Fallon 1997, Horn and Nunez 2000, York-Anderson and Boman 1991— that saw that first generation college students may not be as prepared for college and looked at who they should look to for assistance with the college process. Since the parents of these students did not attend college, school counselors and teachers can be very helpful when looking at colleges. Fallon (1997) argues this by saying, “School counselors are in a powerful position to have a significant impact on minority, economically disadvantaged, first generation students as they consider college options and prepare for higher education” (2). Fallon (1997) goes on to say that counseling about college plans should not begin in a student’s junior or senior year but possibly as
far back as middle school. In middle school the importance of a higher education should be planted. In 9th and 10th grades students should be taught the difference between the different kinds of higher education and the expectations for each one. In the 11th and 12th grades, obviously, there is a lot more stress placed on counselors because they have to give the students who are planning on going to college the proper information and resources that will help them to get into a college that is most likely to meet their needs.

Counselors can also be very helpful when it comes to financial planning such as finding grants, scholarships, and applications for work study programs. Fallon (1997) stresses again that because the parents of first generation college students do not have the knowledge to help their children; counselors play a very influential role. She goes on to say that a lot of these students are not exposed to the academic skills that will allow them to succeed in college and because of this they often perform poorly on standardized testing (Fallon 1997:3). First generation college students may even see a different purpose for a college education than second generation college students do. Second generation college students are more likely to see a college education as a way for personal development whereas first generation college students see a degree as a way to get a good job (Fallon 1997: 4).

Fallon (1997) also talks about the conflicting roles that first generation students have to deal with that many other students do not. "Each one of these settings—home, job, college—have conflicting values and role expectations. First generation students must constantly juggle all three and deal with the conflicting demands that each setting places on them. These conflicting demands cause the first generation student to be more susceptible to dropping out of college" (Fallon 1997:4)
In York-Anderson and Bowman’s 1991 study they were primarily interested in the amount that first generation college students know compared to second generation college students. They sampled 201 freshmen at a rural community college in the Midwest. They were each given a 72 question survey that asked them questions about what they knew about college, parental support, and their parents’ educational level. After collecting the data they discovered that there was a significant difference in family support between the two groups. Although they found that there was not a significant difference between the two groups’ knowledge about college, York-Anderson and Bowman still felt that first generation college students still needed additional support. They also found that second generation college students felt that there received more support for attending college than their first generation counterparts (1991: 119). They went on to question if family support influenced a student’s knowledge about college and again the answer was yes. “College students who perceived more family support for their attendance had higher college knowledge scores than did those students who perceived less support” (York-Anderson and Bowman 1991:120).

They concluded that because parents of first generation college students did not have information, experience, and stories to pass on to their children, that they are probably less knowledgeable about college, they are less likely to have the proper skills and experiences that would help them with adapting and assimilating into the college environment. They said this finding could explain why researchers find higher attrition rates for this group of students because without their family’s support and knowledge of what is expected of them in college they may find it difficult to finish college. They suggest that schools form a support system for first generation college students which
would give them basic information and to also have them attend workshops and have counselors available to them (York-Anderson and Bowman 1991: 121).

Paying for College

Money and financial aid packages are also a serious factor in whether or not a student can attend college (Kerr 1994, Orfield 1990, Panos and Austin 1968). The availability of grants, scholarships, and other forms of financial aid can make an enormous impact on whether or not these students decide to go to college. Clark Kerr in his article, "Expanding access and changing missions: The federal role in U.S. higher education", states that "...significant emphasis was placed on 'educational justice,' on guaranteeing a place for all young people who both wanted and were qualified to pursue higher education, with financial support provided to those who needed it. College attendance became a new entitlement. And enrollments continued to increase, to 8.5 million in 1970, and to 14 million in 1990" (Kerr 1994:28). Orfield (1990) tries to explain why the rates of minority admissions have decreased by looking at college tuition versus the availability of scholarships. He found that in the 1960s there was a lot of pressure from civil rights activists to help disadvantaged students receive college educations, but by the 1980s universities had to cut financial aid packages in order to pay for research. In order to pay for research to be done they had to raise tuition.

Even when the government was giving money to the universities to develop scholarship funds for underprivileged students, the universities did not like the idea of letting everyone receive a college education. "Higher education welcomed the new resources and opportunities for development, but its leaders worried about the quality of
mass education. A popular solution was to limit university enrollments, emphasizing graduate and professional programs, and encourage expansion of other campuses for less prepared students” (Orfield 1990:319). In their 1968 study “Attrition among College Students” Robert J. Panos and Alexander W. Astin found that the “entering college student who is most likely not to complete four years of college within the four years following his matriculation is one who had relatively low grades in high school, who does not plan at the time of college entrance to take graduate or professional work, who comes from a relatively low socioeconomic background, and who racial background is either American Indian or ‘other’” (64). If college administrators view minority and low income students as people who are unlikely to finish college anyways then they would be less likely to give them large financial aid packages.

Challenges

Whereas most of the above researchers used quantitative methods obtain their information several—Benmayor 2002, Phinney and Haas 2003, Rodreiguez 2003—decided to use qualitative methods so that they could get a more personal understanding the of the experiences and challenges of first generation college students. According to Benmayor (2002) students of Mexican descent now make up 25% of the student body in colleges and universities. The college experience may be particularly difficult for them because for many of them they are not only the first ones in their family to go to college but may be the first in their families to graduate high school (Benmayor 2002: 97).

This study was done through a class that was entitled “Oral History and Community Memory: First in my Family to Go to College” that Benmayor taught in
1998 and 2000. Through the course of these two classes 63 students were interviewed, 41 Mexican Americans, 6 African Americans, 1 Asian American and 15 of the interviewees were white (Benmayor 2002: 100). One student responded, "'Usually what encouraged me to go to college was my parents...but, in high school, like teachers or counselors never told me you know, they never encouraged me. So, I always got the encouragement to go to college outside, not inside, school'" (Benmayor 2002: 102). It was not just parents that encouraged them to go to college but also mentoring programs and affirmative action programs. One student said, "'I wanted to go to Hartnell [community college], but then one of my Migrant Education counselors pulled me out of class one day, and she told me I had good grades, a good grade point average, and that I could attend college, other than a community college...So she helped me out by getting applications, going on fieldtrips, visiting universities, and talking to people, to counselors...students at the universities. Basically getting to know more of the life of a university...Because, like I said, I wasn't planning, and if it wasn't for Miss Arroyave....'" (Benmayor 2002:102).

Benmayor(2002) was also interested in what the students felt was their role with regards to their community and whether or not they felt that they were losing their culture by going to college. "Through culturally coded terms, students affirm an awareness of their historically subordinated class location and a sense of their social responsibility as path breakers, for their families and younger siblings as well as for the extended community" (Benmayor 202:113). With regard to their culture, students felt that they were learning more about their culture in schools through books that told them about their history but at the same time families did see some changes in their children.
but the students then felt that they had to help educate their community. “I do want to go
back and help and serve, and be like a resource for them. So, I want to make the
connection between like community and my family, with education, and college life”
(Benmayor 2002:110). One of the other students also said that people in her community
saw that her parents were not wealthy but yet she still went to college so that will
hopefully encourage other people in the community to go to college.

Phinney and Haas (2003) used qualitative methods in their article entitled, “The
Process of Coping Among Ethnic Minority First-Generation College Freshmen: A
Narrative Approach.” They had 30 freshmen keep journals for three weeks. Each week
the students were told that they needed to talk about the stress they have from their
family, school, or personal problems, how they dealt with the stress, and then what they
needed in order to deal with the stress (ie money, support from friends or family). The
goal for their study was to “gain understanding of the coping process in a particular
context through the use of personal narratives in combination with background survey
data. The focus of the study was on the stress faced by ethnic minority college freshmen
who are predominantly the first generation in their family to attend college” (Phinney
and Haas 2003:708). They felt that because these students were the first in their family
to go to college their parents might not be as supportive as are other families. They
might not understand the time commitment that is required to succeed in college.
Similar to Fallon, Phinney and Haas (2003) talked about the conflicting roles that these
students have to play. In their study they asked the students some background
information. Eighty percent of students said that the mother’s education was at or below
high school level. For father’s education, again 80% said it was at or below high school
What was different from other research was that the majority, 56.7%, said that they were carrying a full load of classes which is between 12-15 credit hours (Phinney and Haas 2003:713). This finding contradicts the National Center for Educational Statistics 1998 report which indicated that first generation college students were more likely to only go to college part-time.

When the students began writing their journals the researchers coded their answers according to the type of stress and how they handled it. There were 45 incidents of "proactive" handling of stress which is doing something on your own to solve the problem. The second highest was to seek support with 23 incidents cited. This would involve asking others for help. With regard to resources needed to solve the problem most said that nothing was needed or needing additional resources was not applicable solving the problem with a total of 45 incidents. The second highest was emotional support which would mean turning to friends, family, or counselors for help. For those who had trouble coping with stress they often said that they wished their families understood what they were going through and that they were more supportive. One of the interviewees said, "I could have liked to talk to my best friend, but ... I could not get her to listen to my problems" (Phinney and Haas 2003: 719). There were other students who did not have as many problems coping with the stress. One of the students said that although he did receive some support from family he realized that he needed to do it on their own. They also tended to show a determination and commitment to doing well in school and achieving their goal of graduating from college. Phinney and Haas (2003) concluded, "Individual who feel able to accomplish their goals may be more self-
reliant and thus less sensitive to whether others support them, whereas those who lack a sense of self-efficacy may be more dependent on and sensitive to support” (721).

Rodriguez (2003) conducted a qualitative study consisting of in depth interviews with first generation college students who had already graduated from college. One of the key factors that she found was something she termed “special status” which is when children are treated as special for some reason or another and therefore gain self confidence that would help them take risks in the future. Another key idea that she found important was “positive naming” which is when “someone who cared about them or knew them well helped them develop their potential. The influencer would observe characteristics or talents in them and verbally connect those traits to a profession, vocation, or positive way of life” (Rodriguez 2003: 19). This could include teachers, counselors, and fellow students.

Another aspect that she found significant was “ascending cross-class identification” which “occurs when a person from a lower socioeconomic class gains deep understanding of what life is like in a higher class” (Rodriguez 2003: 21). There is a program in New York City entitled Fresh Air Kids which pairs poor students with middle class families who had gone to college. Alex one of their participants, stated, “Here was living proof that you did not have to be rich to go to college. You had to want to go to college, and you had to work to stay there. I realized that you did not have to be Caucasian or from a particular ethnic group to go to college, because I had wonderful teachers—black, white, Jewish—all of whom must have gone to college” (Rodriguez 2003:22). She also indicates that family support, the role of mentors, and
peer and school counselors in a student’s life have an enormous effect on the student’s academic success.

**Educational Systems: United States versus Europe**

One researcher looked at the United States’ higher education system compared to Europe’s higher education system (Karen 2002). In David Karen’s 2002 article “Changes in Access to Higher Education in the United States: 1980-1992,” he addressed the United States’ Education System in relation to many European systems. He says that “other advanced societies, in which the central state plays a much larger role and in which [college] admission is often determined almost solely by a standardized test, usually administered early in a student’s educational career” (191). In other words, European children, when they are young, are forced into one of two tracks, either an academic track where the child is prepared to go to college/university or the vocational track where they learn skills that will help them in the workforce. At this point the educational system in the United States may seem better but Karen (2002) goes on to say that there is a downside to the educational system in the United States. Higher education in the United States, unlike Europe, is very expensive (Karen 2002:192). So although there are a lot of institutions of higher education in the United States and anyone can apply to them, many students/families cannot afford to go to the best schools. He goes on to state, “This unusual combination of higher educational opportunities and constraints leads to a situation in which the United States appears to hold open the possibility of some kind of postsecondary education for all, while it generally makes it less likely that those from low SES backgrounds (and other subordinate groups) will take
advantage of it and more likely that those from high-SES backgrounds will do so”
(Karen 2002:192).

Conclusions

There are some basic points that the majority of the researchers agreed on.
These points usually consisted of demographic information. The researchers, agreed that
first generation college students were most likely going to be from a lower
socioeconomic status, be a member of a minority group, and to have lower educational
aspirations. With regard to ethnicity, it was consistent throughout the literature that first
generation college students were more likely to come from a minority group, usually of
Hispanic origin. There were also several researchers that found that first generation
college students were more likely to have lower educational aspirations. This means that
they are more likely to only strive to finish their Bachelor’s Degree and then go out into
the work force compared to second generation college students who are more likely to
continue their education and get their MA/MS, PhD, or JD. Another important fact that
several of these researchers discovered was that first generation college students were
more likely to live off campus and to feel less integrated into the college environment.
Knowing this information can better help administrators and policy makers to better
understand the background of some of their incoming freshmen classes.

There were also some characteristics of first generation college students that
researchers disagreed on such as gender, how often they worked, and their choice of
major. With regard to gender, several studies found that first generation college student
were more likely including Chen’s (2005) but Pike and Kuh’s (2005) study found that
they were more likely to be male. Brooks-Terry (1988) found that first generation
college students were more likely to work more hours off campus. Although Hertal (2002) saw a slight difference between the working hours of first and second generation college students there was not a significant difference. With regards to a declared major Chen (2005) and Terenzini et al (1996) had different findings. Chen found that first generation college students were more likely to go to college as an “undecided” major compared to second generation college students. Terenzini et al (1996) found that first generation college students were more likely to come in with a declared major. They actually state that that is one of the only advantages that first generation college students have over second generation college students.

There were also several recommendations that researchers suggested to help first generation college students get into college and to become better integrated once they got there. One of the recommendations, which two different studies suggested, was to get school counselors more involved in helping these students decide on a college career and where it would be best for them to go. Hertal (2002) recommended that first generation college students should live on campus so that they could become better integrated into the college environment. Another recommendation that came from York-Anderson and Bowman’s (1991) study in which they suggest that there needs to be some support system set up for first generation college students so that they will decide to stay in school and get more out of their college experience. This could include counselors, programs, and living on campus as the other researchers suggested.

After studying this literature there are certain elements that I wanted to bring to my study. First of all, although the literature stated over and over again the importance of counselors and teachers in the college process I wanted to know if they were truly the
individuals that were influencing students to go to college. The major influence in why these students decided to go to college seems to be missing in the literature. This is a very important element and therefore needs to be studied. Since American University is a private school I also want to see if the demographic elements match past research. Characteristics such as age, income, and how far away from American University they grew up are all important elements that I will take from the literature and compare it to first generation college students at American University.
CHAPTER 3
SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND METHODS

Sociological Theory

Three perspectives or paradigms are available to sociological researchers as guides for formulating research projects: Positivism, Interpretive Theory, and Critical Theory. Each paradigm has led me to view the experience of first generation college students in a different way. From the Positivist perspective, I use Merton’s ideas of anomie, cultural goals and institutional means. From the Interpretive paradigm, I draw on West and Zimmerman’s concept of doing. And from the Critical Theory, I use Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital.

Positivism

Structural Functionalism, a branch of Positivist theory, says that every aspect of a society can be assessed in terms of its function or contribution to the working of the social system. Exploring situations in which non-functionality arise in social systems, Robert Merton introduced the concept of anomie “an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them” (Merton as cited in Ritzer and Goodman 2004: 112). This basically means that societies set up certain goals and values that people accept and try
to follow. One such goal in American society is the value it places on education. The higher the degree that an individual acquires the more prestige that he/she receives. It does not seem to matter how that individual did in school, it just matters that he/she has that diploma or has that title before their name.

Ritzer and Goodman (2004) go on to say,

...in American society the culture places great emphasis on material success...if one is born into the lower socioeconomic classes and as a result is able to acquire, at best, only a high school degree, one’s chances of achieving economic success in the generally accepted way (for example, through succeeding in the conventional work world) are slim to nonexistent.” (112).

So what are students whose parents never went to college suppose to do?

Acquiring the cultural goal may be more difficult for them than for second generation students because they lack a clear model of access to the institutionalized means to that goal, that is, knowledge about how one goes about getting into college and being a college student. My research sought to discover how first generation college students acquired both the cultural goal and the institutionalized means of access to college education.

Interpretive

The Interpretive Paradigm asks the question “How does an individual internalize and express the meanings of a given society?” To answer that question I draw primarily on West and Zimmerman’s article (1987) “Doing Gender” in which they argue that “doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’”(West and Zimmerman 1987: 126). When this concept of “doing” is
applied to the project of becoming a college student, we can ask what perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities constitute “doing college.” We can see that first and most challenging among these is “doing the application process.” But there are also the perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that first generation college students need to do as they begin attending college—going to class, staying up late, living in dorms, joining clubs, dealing with deadlines, and partying, etc. My research sought to discover how first generation college students learned to do these things.

Critical

The Critical Paradigm asks “In what ways are social goods unequally distributed?” For my research, college education is, of course, the social good. To answer this question I looked at Pierre Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital which is the degree to which an individual is familiar with the dominant culture in society. According to Bourdieu each socioeconomic class has differing degrees of cultural capital and what determines what is considered cultural capital is what the dominant culture of that society values. The typical examples of cultural capital are language, values, manners, familiarity with art and music.

According to Bourdieu there is an intrinsic contradiction in the education system because it is suppose to give each student cultural capital but assumes that these students already have the knowledge and familiarity of that given culture.

An educational system which puts into practice an implicit pedagogic action, requiring initial familiarity with the dominant culture, and which proceeds by imperceptible familiarization, offers information and training which can be received and acquired only by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions that is the condition for the success of the transmission and of the
inculcation of the culture...This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competence and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture (Bourdieu 1973:58).

So from the very beginning of a poor child’s schooling, they are already behind in their education. If they do not earn enough cultural capital can he/she ever go to college? Will they be able to know and use the proper language and skills that will allow them admittance to a good college or university? Bourdieu goes on to say that the education perpetuates this cycle and for society, it seems legitimate. Universities do not just want everyone to be able to go to college because that would bring down the prestige that the university receives and the value of a diploma.

“The objective mechanisms which enable the ruling classes to keep the monopoly of the most prestigious educational establishments, while continually appearing at least to put the chance of possessing that monopoly into the hands of every generation, are concealed beneath the cloak of a perfectly democratic method of selection which takes into account only merit and talent, and these mechanism are of a kind which converts to the virtues of the system the members of the dominated classes....”(Bourdieu 1973: 61).

In other words, although the government and society says that a college education is available for anyone who works hard enough for it, which obviously is not true. So if the upper classes do hold a monopoly on the best universities in the country, how do students who do not hold as much cultural capital get into them? How can they possibly compete with wealthy students whose parents have taken them to plays, concerts, and trips around the world?
Methodology

In order to find first generation college students I used a method called snowball sampling. Babbie (2004) describes this method as, “a nonprobability sampling method often employed in field research whereby each person interviewed may be asked to suggest additional people for interviewing” (184). I decided to use a nonprobability sampling method because it would be difficult to get the sampling frame that I would need for a probability sample which would require a formal list of students. The only people who would have access to a list of first generation college students would be Admissions personnel and they would most likely not be willing to give me that information or it would take too long because of the bureaucracy of the university. In order to ensure privacy I conducted the interviews in a professor’s office who was on sabbatical. Before I began each interview I told the interviewee that I would be tape recording the interview. After I interviewed each first generation college student, I asked them for the contact information of any other first generation college students that they might know at American University. Because a lot of them did not know any other first generation college students I had to go back my original sources to find additional first generation college students.

Since contamination could be an issue with this kind of study, I asked each interviewee not to tell other first generation college students a lot of the details that we discussed. Contamination is also referred to as diffusion of treatment which Neuman (2004) defines as, “when the treatment ‘spills over’ from the experimental group, and control group subjects modify their behavior because they learn of the treatment” (355).
Although there is not a control group or an experimental group, I did not want interviewees talking to each other about the questions that I asked because then the interviewee will have time to think about his/her answer. I wanted their responses to be spontaneous. Also, I would not be able to fully understand the needs and experiences of first generation college students if the second interviewee changed his/her answer so it matched the first interviewee.

There are other issues that I needed to deal with such as reliability and validity of my data. Reliability, as defined by Babbie, is “that quality of measurement method that suggests that the same data would have been collected each time in repeated observations of the same phenomenon” (2004:G9). For qualitative research, reliability is often low compared to validity, which I will address next. The information I gathered from the participants depends a lot on my relationship with them. If I am able to get the participants to relax and to tell me about their experiences getting ready to go to college and their initial transition period, I will obtain better information than a researcher who did not have this rapport with them. Validity, as defined by Babbie, is “a term describing a measure that accurately reflects the concept it is intended to measure” (2004:G11). Validity is often high for qualitative research because if the participant does not understand a question they can tell the researcher that they do not understand and the researcher can rephrase the question. Also, if the researcher does not understand exactly what the participant is talking about or wants him/her to expand on a subject, it is easier than if they were completing a survey.

An issue that I needed to keep in mind was “reactivity” which is a problem when the participant knowing that he/she is being studied. Since the participants knew that I
was tape recording the interview; they may have felt self-conscious about their responses. They may have also wanted to give me the answers that they thought that I wanted to hear. In order to limit this I tried to make each participant feel as comfortable as possible. Before the interview starts, I told them that all of their responses are going to be kept confidential and I explained what that means. This hopefully persuaded them to be honest about their experiences.

There are certain terms that I needed to operationalize in order to make my project clear both for myself and the participants. The most important term that I had to operationalize is “first generation college student” which I defined as a student whose parents did not go to a four year college or university. Their parents could have gone to a two year college/vocational school. Also, it is very important that neither parent went to a four year college. Another term that I had to operationalize was “second generation college student” which I defined as those students whose parents obtained a college degree.

I anticipated very few risks to the participants. In order to protect the participants I abided by the Code of Ethics for Social Research defined by the American Sociological Association. I interviewed only college students age 18 or older. This way the students that I interviewed were not considered children and therefore they did need special safeguards that the IRB would have suggested. They can legally sign the informed consent form and I did not need special permission from their parents or guardians. I gave each of them an informed consent form which I had them sign. This form told them about my project and by signing it they were saying that I had informed them about my project and that I was allowed to use their information for my thesis. I also did not want
to cause the participants any harm or embarrassment. Before I began each interview I
told them that about my project and that they could stop the interview at any time. I
also promised the participants confidentiality. In order to do this, I gave each interviewee
a pseudonym so that anyone who reads my thesis will not know who I interviewed. Only
I have the master list of the real names and the names that I referred to them as in my
thesis. I have this list in a very safe place so that no one will have access to it. I also
have IRB approval which means that American University stands behind my research and
they consider it ethical.

Once I had finished gathering my data, I transcribed the interviews and analyzed
them for common themes. I also looked for negative cases which are interviews/answers
that are different from the other cases that I have collected. To do this I used Content
Analysis, which Newman (2004) describes as “Research in which one examines patterns
of symbolic meaning within written text, audio, visual, or communication medium”
(354). He goes on to say that it allows the researcher to use systematic counting that can
be turned into quantitative data (Newman 2004: 219). For my key question, “who or
what encouraged you to go to college?” I had several possible answers already selected
so that I could ask appropriate follow up questions. The options that I thought were
possibilities were parents, relatives, friends/peers, books/movies, media, program, etc.
On the students image of college there were a wide range of possibilities that I was
willing to explore. Some of them were stress, feeling isolated, intimate classes where
people feel comfortable to talk, crazy parties, hanging out with friends on the quad,
staying up all night with friends or for papers/exams, going to parties, among others. For
financial aid and jobs, I assumed that a lot of these students had some kind of financial
aid package so I made sure to ask what kind of financial aid they received specifically. When it came to working I wanted to explore on campus work versus off campus work I asked where they worked and how that affected their experience. There were a wide variety of jobs that could be expected including, babysitting, coffee shop, waiter/waitress, intern, work/study in an office, working in a mall, among many others. For “housing” there were basically only two options, either on campus or off campus. Although I did expand that to those who used to live on campus but now live off campus. For “plans after graduation”, I wanted to make sure that I encompassed all the options such as going on to get their Master’s/PhD either here or at another college, going to work in DC, going back home to work, or even those who did not know exactly what they wanted to do next. For their “support system at American University”, I wanted to see who these students turned to when they needed help, so for this question professors, counselors, academic support center, writing center, friends, and family were all possible options. For their “transition experience” I did not know what to expect. I knew that they would either be positive or negative but I deliberately left this question open-ended and without probes so that the individual could tell me their story and I could answer follow up questions that were appropriate. When asking whether the student felt that his/her experience was different from second generation college students there was three possible options, either it was different, it was not different, or a mixture of the two. I then left it open for the student to again tell their story.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

In order to learn more about first generation college students I conducted a test case at American University where I conducted 21 interviews during the spring semester of 2006. As explained in the preceding methodology section, I asked approximately 30 open ended questions with follow up questions as appropriate. The interviews had an average length of 45 minutes. My primary focus for my research was to learn more about first generation college students, that is students whose parents did not go to college; I wanted to understand the processes by which they came to the decision to go to college- specifically who or what encouraged them to go to college in general, and to consider American University specifically since it is an expensive private school. I also wanted to discover to what degree, if any, their status as a first generation college student affected their transition experience.

Demographic Information.

In order to make the interviewee more comfortable I started each interview with a serious of demographic questions including name, age, and number of siblings. I have summarized these findings in Table 1. Of these 21 participants, 17 were female and 4 were male. When asked where they came from, 16 respondents or 76% of respondents indicated that they were from somewhere along the Eastern seacoast of the United States. The vast majority of students, 86%, said that they were between the ages of 18
and 24, this can be considered typical college age. Out of the 21 respondents, 19 were undergraduate students and 2 were graduate students. Although I did not include a specific race/ethnicity question in my interview guide I realized that this characteristic was important so from appearances and the answers to several questions I put respondents into categories. The majority, 12 out of 21 students or 57%, belonged to a minority group. Of these 12, six were Asian, four were African or African American and two were Hispanic. Nine out of 12, or 43%, were white. Again this is from my perception and not how they self identified.

As a way to better understand first generation college students, I also asked several questions about their parents, including their education level and their occupations. For the majority of respondents, high school was the highest level of education their parents received. One of the respondents indicated that her father had left before she was born and she had no information about him so for the fathers the number is out of 20. For mothers, 14 participants or 67% said that high school was their mother's highest level of education while only 11 participants or 55% of fathers said that it was their highest level of education. Six fathers, or 30%, had received less than a high school diploma compared to only 14% of mothers who had received less than a high school degree. While looking at those parents who went on for additional training mothers and fathers are close in their percentages, 19% and 15% respectively. It should be noted that 7 respondents said that their parents had immigrated to the United States.

The majority of respondents, 17 out of 21, indicated that they had at least 1 sibling. Between them, the 21 students that I interviewed they had a grand total of 39 siblings. Out of these 39 siblings, 54% had gone on to college and had either received
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*siblings

hs=high school
aa=associates
ms=middle school
ts=trade school
gs=grade school
na=don’t know

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a degree or were in the process of earning their degree. Twenty-six percent of the siblings were still in high school with hopes that they will continue in the participant's footsteps and go to college.

Although it was not one of my original questions, I decided that in order to fully understand these students and their background it would help if I knew their parents' occupations. For their mother's occupations, 11 out of 21 students, or 52%, said that their mother held a pink collar job. This would include secretary, hairstylist, and housewife. The next highest percentage was white collar jobs with 6 students giving this response, or 29%. This category would include banker and billing analyst. There were also 2 mothers who owned a business with their husbands. Since I was unable to get information on one of the fathers the percentages were out of twenty. For father's occupation, 8 out of 20, or 40% said that their father held a blue collar job. White collar jobs and those who owned their own business were tied with 5 students giving that response for each. For white collar jobs this would include air traffic controller, network engineer, and insurance broker. For those who owned their own business, three of the fathers owned a business on their own and two owned the business with their wives.

To sum up, the majority of the students that I interviewed were female, typical college age, and came from the East coast. They also were likely to have at least one sibling who was either still in high school or had attended college.
Influences on the Decision to go to College

One of the key questions I asked was "Who or what influenced you to go to college?" Although this question was open-ended the majority of respondents gave one of two answers - either their parents or through their own initiative.

Parents. Parents were the most popular response with 10 students saying that one or both of their parents encouraged them to go to college. Out of these students, 20% named their mother specifically and 30% singled out their father as the one who influenced them. The other 50% stated that their parents, collectively, influenced their decision to go to college. Steve, a 21-year-old Political Science major from New York, spoke of the sacrifices that his parents did for him and his sister so that they would one day be able to go to college. In the following passage he talks specifically about his father who is a plumber and a conversation that they had when he was young.

Um I always knew I was going to college you know, I think my parents always made that one of the most important things ever and they always valued education. And to them education was kind of, you know, the bread and butter of their existence. You know its what you know, they're working so I have an education and my dad always made it clear, you know a lot of these Italian fathers you know its so easy to take your kids to work, it's so easy, it's so easy [to] teach them what you do and when I use to go to work with my dad when I was little it was fun. You know, you're with your dad and you know he makes it fun for you and what he is doing is interesting and it's a hard days work. And you get home and you clean your hands and there is a satisfaction from it but really as I got older he just stopped. He's like look you're not coming anymore. I love you and I want you to come but I don't want you to learn this. I don't want you to learn what I do. You know I break my ass, he's like I break my ass so you don't have to. He's like if you look at the blisters on my hands, I do this so you get paper cuts when you flip through the pages in your textbook. Um so they made it very clear, you are not going to become a contractor and I think always growing up with education having such a strong influence and just being such a, just always hovering over us you know, that's the reason why your family came to America to make sure you had a better life and education is the
way. So I always knew, I always knew I was going to college. I mean what college I was going to was in question but I always knew I’d be studying.

Other students described their parents influence as an expectation that they were engrained with since they were young. Since these students had this expectation since they were young when they got to the stage when the college process began, it was just assumed that they will go to college. Rachel, a 19-year-old Sociology major from New York, talks about how her parents encouraged her and her two siblings:

My parents have always instilled that you need to make something of yourself. Like my mom has always wanted to go to college but she never could so she has always told us that… it’s just been something that has been engrained in us, like it’s not even a second thought to us. It’s like you go to high school and then you go to college and that’s just the way it is, it’s not even questionable.

For some parents, respondents reported, they themselves wanted to go to college but for whatever reason, usually financial, they were unable to go. Because they regretted their inability to go they wanted to make sure that their children did not miss this opportunity. Nicole, a 19-year-old International Studies major from Pennsylvania said,

I guess it’s cause we had the opportunity, our parents pushed us towards that. I know because my mom didn’t get to go to college so she wanted us to. And my dad he went to Penn State but he only got an Associates Degree and I know from his experience that he wanted us to definitely go to college too and he wanted us to definitely live at school and learn how to live on our own and all the other things that college can bring that he, because of financial problems, his family couldn’t afford for him to go all four years so he kind of had to pay for his own college and now that we are able to go he wants us to do it.

On Their Own: Although parents seemed to have a huge impact on whether a student decided to go to college or not, this was not the only answer that students gave.
Relying on oneself was another major response. Many students indicated that since their parents did not know how to help them with the college process and they did not know who to rely on, they had to rely on their own ingenuity. Meg, a 19-year-old International Finance major from California, is a great example of the barriers that these students had to overcome. She credits herself for getting into college. She states,

Because they [her parents] didn’t really have any idea about how to get me to college. They were pretty much clueless. Um, I mean I love figuring things out for myself so I figure ok, so what do I need to do and just getting a boom for the internet [the searching ability on the internet increased], I was just “ah, the internet, wonderful.” So I just did all this research and I found out about the SATs, I start prepping for the SATs, took it a lot of times. I was figuring out all the classes I would need to go to college, not just to graduate high school. Um also other things, what was wanted by colleges, extra curricular activities, so I did sports and I joined clubs, they were lame, but I did them and I mean that was it.

Program: Three students, or 14%, said that they were part of a program that helped students prepare for college. These programs included Upward Bound and Latin American Youth Center, among others. With these programs, students were put into contact with people who could guide them in their college search. Jennifer, a 21-year-old International Studies major from Massachusetts said,

Cause I was in a program called Upward Bound for first generation students and you know who are low income and stuff to go to college and that was actually my first push. Um and the reason I went into that program because I always wanted to go college because I live in an inner city so there is a lot of violence and like all that fun stuff so I really wanted to get away from it. Um and that was my first real push and motivation to get into it. I was always a really good student in school so I was like you know there is something better out there for me than this and then I joined the program...

High school Teacher or Counselor: There were 3 students or 14% of respondents said that the high school they attended encouraged them to go to college. This included
both teachers and classmates. Alyssa, a 24-year-old Sociology major from Ghana talks about when she first came to the United States how one of her ESL [English as a Second Language] teachers really helped her and encouraged her to continue her education. When asked who encouraged her to go to college she answered,

I would say back in high school um, well when I first came here I did not speak any English, I didn’t know how to read and I had some ESL teachers and even though I wasn’t a good reader they motivated me. They kept telling me I was a great reader and they could imagine me becoming something greater so I did not want to say to them, because I always had that thought behind me, that I can be someone greater or I can go beyond high school so I would say, there is not a particular person but my ESL teachers from high school

Book: There was also one student who drew her inspiration to go to college from a book she read when she was young. After reading this book she realized her love for foreign cultures and decided that was what she wanted to study when she got to college. Kristen, a 19-year-old Undecided major from New York, was that student and this is how she answered the question,

...when I was younger a lot of my teachers, I remember them stressing culture and studying a book. There was a book that I read in 4th grade that made me interested in culture and where I decided to go into anthropology and international work. And that was, I still have it, Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes its one of my favorite books. That was ten, no nine, ten years ago that I read that, that it was read to me and I wanted to go into that field. So it really helped

In Need of Experts

Although this was not a specific question in my interview guide, 8 out of 21, or 38% of respondents said that they had to get additional help with their education. Four of these students said that their parents were the ones that paid for it. This included tutors during school to help these students with subjects that they were having difficulty
with and college counselors to help them get into college. Meg, a 19-year-old International Finance major from California described how her parents’ willingness to hire a college counselor helped her. She stated,

Lucky thing, my parents’ business was successful at the time so I was able to afford to get a college advisor/admissions advisor to help me/give me even clearer direction, how to get to college.... Well she helped me out in my essays, they were crappy. I don’t know how I got into college with those but she helped me with the essays, she helped me open my mind to not just Georgetown. Other colleges, smaller colleges, um help open my eyes to the idea of American and also just in general having a cleaner application. A little more direct, concise and just more attractive, marketable.

There were others who applied to specific programs that would help them develop the skills that would help them get into college. Although their parents did not have to pay these programs, the students’ parents encouraged them to apply to these programs so that the experts staffed by these programs would help their children get into college. These programs included Upward Bound and Latin American Youth Center in DC, among others. Jennifer, a 21-year-old International Studies major from Massachusetts, talked about her Upward Bound experience,

Well um we did a lot of workshops, um and we did a lot of college tours, trying to get us use to college and stuff and then they helped us with our college applications. Um, basically it’s the whole feel of it, its just an environment from an inner city environment putting with a whole group of kids who have the same kind of ambition to go to college. So, which is very, very inspiring.... Yeah, yeah, what happens was we went to UMass, Amherst for a summer and then you spend [time] there and you do work and do class work and you work on your essays and stuff like that so its basically taking you away from that kind of inner city and putting you in a college environment to tell you what to expect when you are in college, and stuff like that so

In sum, the majority of students felt that their parents, in one way or another, had encouraged them to go to college. They not only gave the initial push but
continued to motivate them to finish their degrees and to make something of their lives. The second most popular response was that they had to rely on themselves in order to get to college and although this may seem difficult for some, they felt that it was the only way that they were going to achieve their dream. Some students decided to rely on a program to help them get into college. They realized that their parents could not help them, even though they may have wanted to, so they turned to programs that would give them the information and skills that were needed to get into college.

**Image of College**

One possible problem for first generation college students is a lack of knowledge about what the college experience will be like. One of the questions that I asked students was “what did you think college would be like?” The reason why this interested me was that for second generation college students they can ask their parents or friends of their families, but for first generation college students they might not have access to college graduates. There were three main groups that participants fell into when asked about what they thought college would be like. The first images that came to mind were either classes/work, social atmosphere, or that they did not have any idea of what college would be like before they came here.

Half of the students thought primarily of classes and the work that is involved in going to college. Some thought that college life would be very hard and stressful, filled with mean professors, big lecture halls, and hard exams. Courtney, a 20-year-old Communications major from Washington D.C., said,
I thought it was going to be very hard, I thought it was going to be very hard. Um I questioned whether or not I’d be prepared, like I felt the teachers you know were going to be very strict and like I didn’t know if you had to raise your hand to go to the bathroom you know…. I remember when I was on a college visit here, when I was really interested in American, this girl took me to her communications class and they were sitting there and fifteen minutes into the class a girl walked in late and I just remember thinking, “oh my gosh, what an irresponsible student” you know “if I was in college I would never do that”

One student even calls his image of what college would be like as “romantic,” the idealized image of learned people sitting around having in depth, open discussions about important topics of the day. Mark, a 36 year old Sociology major from Pennsylvania share his image of what he thought college would be like,

Well I had this romantic dream of eating cheese and drinking wine, you know what I mean, and being poor and that part has happened. But I didn’t, I couldn’t, I didn’t have any conceptualization of being in a classroom… what is it, Dead Poets Society, them going to school. You know you see, I can’t think of anything specifically, you see the empty lecture halls and see people with these little recorders because its so overwhelmingly large….Well just, more or less, just being constantly busy and um, living on bread and cheese and because you are starving and just drinking wine, that was the romantic part, but just hulling away and not quite being a recluse but you know, I thought I was going to have to work really hard and I do work really hard, but I thought I was going to have to really, really focus and isolate myself.

There were also those who combined the two images, both the hostile classroom part and the social atmosphere. Tina, a 19-year-old Broadcast Journalism major from New York City, told me about what her image of college was before she arrived at American University. This is how she pictured college life,

I mean drunk people running around and like and um horrible teachers who weren’t anything like high school nice, um what else did I expect, … Um, I mean the stereotype, like my grandmother always tells me, don’t, she literally says “don’t talk to frat guys”. I don’t know if she understands exactly what it is, I think, what she hears on 20/20 or whatever.
When Anna, a 27-year old International Studies major from Texas was picturing what college was like she thought primarily of the ethnic backgrounds of the people that she would meet. She says,

Well I thought it was going to be different. Just the ambiance, was going to be different. Um, the ethnic, I don’t know what you call it, ethnic background, was totally different from what I came from, like where I came from was a lot of Hispanics. And when I came to AU, there was a lot of Caucasians, Europeans, there was a small majority of Arabs and Asians people but there wasn’t Hispanics so that is how I thought it would be different. Then I guess the other things, I didn’t think it would be that difficult to like register for classes and advising, student accounts, financial aid, I didn’t know how to deal with it.

There were others who did not know what to expect when they were going to college. They decided to just test the waters and hope that they would be able to adapt to their new environment. Melissa, a 21-year-old Public Relations major from Massachusetts, talks about her experience coming to American University,

I have no idea. I was scared, I was really nervous to go because I didn’t know what to expect. Cause we didn’t have the stories. Like I didn’t have the parents that were like “oh my goodness, when I was in this sorority we did this, this, and this.” No one really knew what to tell me. And I ended up living in a very odd dorm room with three insane people that were completely different than I am. I mean they couldn’t have picked more random people to live in the same closet sized room than they did.

In sum, there was a variety of responses for this question. Some focused solely on the academic side of college life, stressing the hardships that were to come in the classroom and the isolation that they felt they were going to feel once they got here. There were others who thought of the social environment, thinking about dorm life, parities, and making friends.
Financial

According to the American University’s data, tuition, room and board, and books will cost the typical AU student approximately $41,843 per year for the 2006-2007 school year. This does not include transportation, health insurance, which the university requires, or personal expenditures. As of fall 2006, 68% of admitted freshmen received some kind of financial aid or scholarship.

When asked if they received any form of financial aid, i.e. scholarships, grants, or work/study, 81% said that they received some help from the school or government to pay for their education (See Table 2). This number does not include those who are paying for their college education just through loans.

Although the majority of respondents said that they receive money for their education many of them still continue to work outside of school. Out of the 21 people that I interviewed, 17 had to work, which is 81% of respondents. This number includes those who were involved in the work/study program, those who were interning, in addition to everyone else who worked off campus.

Working on or off campus can have an effect on the student’s college experience. When asked this question there were mixed results about whether working enriched or hindered their college experience. For those who did not have to work, either because their parents paid for them or because of scholarships, no one indicated that not having to work had negative consequences. For those whose students who did not have to work, they seemed to enjoy the freedom that goes with putting all their time and effort into their schoolwork, building friendships, and making the most out of their college
experience. Courtney, the 20-year-old Communications major from Washington D.C., said,

I think it enriches it a lot more just because I can spend more time in class and doing homework um, seeing people and socializing, participating in clubs and I think if I had to work I would really miss out on a lot of those things.

Table 2- Financial Aid

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* Karen is a full time employee of American University so she receives tuition remission for up to five credits a year.
For those that did have to work, 8 out of 17 or 47% thought that working was a positive experience. They felt that by working they were getting the experience and the connections that would benefit them once they graduated. Kristen, a 19-year-old Undecided major from New York, who has a work/study job on campus, talks about the benefits of having a job on campus and the connections that she has made through this job. She talked about how having to work has affected her college experience,

I guess it means that I have to, because I work work/study my hours are very much, aren't bad. Like my friend Michelle works off campus at Starbucks and she is always complaining because she can’t go out when she has to open at nine the next morning. Things like that. So my job hasn’t affected me that much just because of the hours I keep but it also has helped out a lot in life, in Anthropology, and now I know I look, I will have a bit up from other people if they apply for the Anthropology Master’s, graduate work here, I will have a step up because I know the professors, I know the department really well, and also Sociology, I mean I know a lot of people in that department. It works to my advantage. But my job hasn’t effected my studies much, I mean I do a lot of homework here and plus I need to work. When I am away, I need something else to take up my time other than schoolwork. I find a job relaxing.

There were also several students who worked off campus. Mark, the 36-year-old from Pennsylvania, when asked how working has affected his college experience stated,

Um but it does affect my college experience, its, I’ve thought a lot about this, in the sense, what’s really frustrating is to get the jobs that I want I need to get college done but I’ve worked since I was 15. Um, you know I’ve had well paying jobs, I’ve been in charge, I’ve been a manager or supervisor in most of the places I’ve worked. Um, but now you know, week to week, paycheck to paycheck, my banks lost one of my paychecks so I’m like trying to deal with that right now so my stress doesn’t come into how I am doing to get my papers done, its how am I going to feed myself or pay my bills while I’m doing this. I think both, you know I could have a great landscaping business if I wanted to, I don’t, you know, I don’t want that so I’m not really.... But because I’ve had to work so much, um, I don’t think I have the time to put into my school work as much so I think some of the work, like the paper sitting right over there is junk, and I knew it was junk but I had to get something turned in so I did
what I had to do. So I think my experience is that I don’t think I am always able to give what I know I could, in either direction. So I can’t say it suffers but it’s definitely different.

Nineteen percent of respondents felt that working has taken away from fully participating in the college experience. Amanda, a 24-year-old Latin American Studies major from Maryland talked about her frustrations of not being able to become fully engaged in the college atmosphere,

A lot, um, because it took away from meeting people, it took away from joining clubs, like at MC [Montgomery College] it took away from like joining study groups and stuff like that like it just um, like I didn’t know what it was like to be a student because I was always, like I said I was always out of place. I was a working adult but like their age and like younger than the actual working adults so it was sort of different. Here, it’s still different because I’m so much older than everyone else. Well not so much older but just life experiences are so different so even at transfer orientation that we had it was difficult to meet other people my age transferring because everyone else was pretty young. Um so even last semester, like study groups and things like that, um kind of like took away from, working took away from like actually going

In sum, the majority of the students that I interviewed received some form of financial aid, either through scholarships, grants or work/study. The financial aid that they received could not pay for all their tuition so many of them also had to take out loans. In addition to their busy class schedules the majority of students I interviewed also worked at a part time job, either through work/study, internships, or found a job off campus.

Housing

As part of the college experience where a student decides to live will affect how they view college and their ability to fully integrate themselves into the college environment. When asked if they lived on campus or off campus, 8 out of 21 or 38%
lived on campus. These students were mostly freshmen and sophomore students. Thirteen students or 62% indicated that they lived off campus. Although it is expected that the graduate students live off campus and it is probably not unexpected that the majority of upperclassmen live off campus. What is surprising is that all of the transfer students live off campus as well. In regards to housing there probably is not a lot of difference between first generation college students and the rest of the student body. Here are just a couple examples of the responses that first generation college students gave when asked this question. Jennifer, a 21-year-old International Studies major from Massachusetts, originally lived on campus but after two years decided to move off campus with a friend she had made through a club,

Well I lived in Leonard, um that was interesting on its own, its international hall. I met a lot of my friends through the dorms but it was interesting. It was definitely a learning experience. I realized that I like my own space a lot. Um and I don’t know I think the image that I have of college when I first came in was that they are all like very mature, and like, yeah living in the dorm really destroyed that for me...[how was living off campus different?] Um I think now cause I developed more of a comfortable, like area of myself as a college student um it’s really nice. I like the privacy and I like coming on campus to do work and then going home to sleep, I like that.

There are also those who were lucky enough to have an amazing roommate experience and would not have traded it for anything. This is what happened to Paul, a 21-year-old Public Relations major from New York, who has been roommates with the same person for three years. He is talking about having to live with somebody else,

Its like everything else, you just have to adapt. You can complain, that’s how it is, you just have to make the best out of it. I was lucky enough to get a great, great roommate who I still to this day, love to live with and have so much fun with.
To sum up, the majority of the people I interviewed lived off campus, living either by themselves or with people that they met at American University. They were also mostly upperclassman. The students that I talked to that still lived on campus were usually underclassman.

Plans for After Graduation?

When asked what they are planning to do after they finally receive their Bachelor’s degrees, 6 out of 19, or 32% plan on going straight out to the workforce. Nine students or 47% of those interviewed planned on going on to get an advanced degree, either a Master’s Degree or their JD. Kristen, the 19-year-old Undecided major from New York, was willing to share with me her “life plan”

I am hoping to get a BA/MA in Anthropology; I want to get into the BA/MA program so I can start taking my graduate courses when I am a senior. And then it will only take me a year to get my MA in Anthro [Anthropology] and then I want do some time with the Peace Corps definitely. Which hurts because I want, I just found this out, I wanted to get an internship with the CIA hopefully when I was a junior or a senior, you can’t have any affiliation with the CIA actually if work with any form for the CIA then you are expelled from joining the Peace Corps. [really] I just learned that its automatic but I don’t know if it goes both ways, if you are in the Peace Corps can you go into the CIA. I don’t know how that works out. I have to look into that but I am thinking maybe, for Anthropology maybe I kind of want to teach and make an MA teaching secondary education, I think I need to go into that area.

Four students, or 21%, had not decided if they were going to go straight on to get another degree or if they were going to work first. Although they all said that they were planning on going on to get a more advanced degree eventually. The majority of the interviewees quickly answered with what seemed to be one of three answers, either
continue with their schooling, either JD, Master’s or PhD, work, or they were still undecided whether they were going to work first or continue with their education.

Mark, the 36-year-old Sociology major from Pennsylvania, has not decided whether he will continue on with his education right away or he will enter the work force. His mixed feelings on this matter are shown when he stated,

I'm trying to decide. Well I'm considering, well trying to go to work now. I'm trying to get to the point where, I'm trying to learn the job with one of the unions where I can work part-time or an organizational group that would be part time cause I need to sustain my livelihood. Um, I'm trying to decide if I want to do the combined major. I mean the undergrad/grad program. Um, I don't know. I mean right now I just want to be done. On the hand it's a really good opportunity um but otherwise I'm probably moving out West. Either I'll get my MA and then move out west or I'll get the undergrad and then move out west. And then I'll decide from there.

In sum, the majority of the first generation college students that I interviewed said that they were planning on getting a more advanced degree right after they graduated from American University or soon after. There were some that felt that they did not need a more advanced degree and wanted to go straight into the workforce to start practicing the skills that they were learning in the classroom.

Support Network at AU

Second generation college students at American University can always call their parents, relatives, or friends with any questions they have about school. First generation college students might not have those resources. I was curious to see if first generation college students knew other first generation college students and if they were more likely to talk to them about certain subjects compared to their other friends. Thirteen out of 21
respondents or 62% said they did know other first generation college students. Four of those students or 33% of this group had belonged to a special group that attracts first generation college students such as Upward Bound, LIFT, or STEP. Only one student indicated that he was more likely to talk to a first generation college student about certain subjects than to a second generation college student. Paul, the 21-year-old Public Relations major form New York, explained his reasons why he felt more comfortable talking to a first generation college student,

I guess race is the biggest issue because its, its first generation usually is not a male Caucasian. I guess its how, not first generation, people don’t understand how we approach things and usually students can call their parents and ask them what to do for this, we can’t its not the same, we are more independent. And it’s, I guess that’s why all of us are so close because, we don’t feel like we work harder it’s that we know that we don’t have so many people to rely on…. Say I want to discuss, like if I had a problem with one of my professors and I wanted to report them but I wouldn’t know how to do that. I can’t call my parents, I can’t call my mom and tell her “can you call the dean’s office and complain?” cause she really can’t speak English. Or I would ask them what to do or just talking as friends. I feel like I am closer to them, I feel that they understand where I’m coming from and why I do the things I do.

Eight students out of 21, or 38%, said that they were unsure whether they knew any first generation college students. They went on to explain that their parents’ education was not something that they usually talked about. They thought that their friends’ parents had gone to college but they were not sure. Meg, the 19-year-old International Business major from California, is a good example of a student who was not sure if her friends were first generation college students or not. She says, “Um, I am not really sure. We don’t really talk about that. I think most of my friends’ parents have college degrees. I have never really thought about that”
In sum, the majority of the people that I interviewed said that they knew at least one first generation college student. Sometimes it was through a program or club in which they were involved. Sometimes it just happened to be a roommate. There were others who were not sure whether any of their friends were first generation college students.

**Transition Experience**

When asked how American University could make their transition to college easier, they answered varied but the majority of them revolved around needing more help and feeling like American University was not doing enough to meet their needs. Melissa, the 21-year-old Public Relations major from Massachusetts, talks about the challenges she faced not only as a first generation college student but also as a transfer student,

As a transfer student they probably should drop the price. At least on the programs, the orientation programs, they should have created more social gatherings just for transfer students. Like they have freshmen week or freshmen month or whatever they have. They should have more social gatherings geared towards transfer students, just to mingle around and connect with people because that’s probably the largest factor in whether or not you are going to succeed. Because if you have supportive friends, if you have healthy friends that, you have friends that you click with and you can fall back on it makes it that much easier, but they didn’t do that at least, or maybe they did and I just wasn’t informed. .... [As a first generation college student] It would be nice to know that you are not kind of by yourself cause I mean there are other people around cause you can’t just, you know, judge a book by its cover, there are plenty of people that deal with issues that just aren’t on the surface but it would be nice to know that other people have a difficult time and have struggled and have worked a little harder to get where they are but I mean apart from that.

Several students said that they felt lost when they first came to American University and stated that it would have helped them if American University would have
given them additional support to help with the transition. Kelly, the 19-year-old
International Studies major from Delaware, stated, “I wish they had at least a support
group or something for first generation kids; at least that or perhaps special programming.
It’s kind of like we don’t exist which we probably don’t”

In sum, when asked about their transition experience many of the students felt that
American University could have done more to help them adapt to their new environment.
Some recommendations that they suggested were more programming aimed specifically
at them and a support group. Since several of the first generation college students were
transfer students they also suggested that the orientation program that they had to go to
should be more relevant to their needs.

**College Experience Different than Second
Generation College Students?**

When asked the question if they thought their college experience was different
from students whose parents went to college the answer was a resounding “yes.” The
majority of respondents, 12 out of 21, stated that their parents were unable to either fully
understand what they were going through or they were unable to provide the connections
that would help them get internships and jobs in the future. Andrea, a 20-year-old
International Business major from Minnesota, explains why she thinks it was harder for
her to adapt to the college environment compared to her fellow classmates,

Kids who have parents who went to college emphasize the
importance of it early on and is better prepare[d] for it. Kids with parents
holding degree grew up in an environment that foster academia
vocabulary and knew what their expectations are when they graduate—to
go on to college. For me, I didn’t even think about going to college, it’s
nice to not have pressure but it was also difficult to not know anything
about the college application process. I went to all the college visits by
myself, student parent orientation by myself and did everything by myself. Having support from your parents can really help you make your transition easier. My parents cannot provide the support because they do not know what college is or the slightest idea of what I do while I am in DC. For all they know, I am just in school. School for them is all the same, elementary, junior high, high school and college. They do not know the difference between the different levels of school.

Some students felt that since their parents had not gone to college they were unable to help them get ready to go to college and how to start the college process. Kelly, a 19-year-old an International Studies major form Delaware, talked about how she felt her college experience is different from other students. She said,

I think that other students just know more about college and how it works and their parents probably work special jobs and stuff and they have more connections and they just, they just know more where we are experiencing it for the first time. Kind of testing the waters and they have people to turn to for advice and stuff where we are like ‘uhh’, we just kind of guess.

There was only one first generation college student who felt his experience was easier than his second generation cohorts. Mark, the 36-year-old Sociology major from Pennsylvania, explains why he thinks being a first generation college student is easier.

They [second generation college students] may have a higher expectation for them to go to college, for me it was always a choice. Um, and maybe more related to my high school experience, um, where there was always a ... where you can do what you want. If you want to go then you can go can, we will support you, if you don’t than you don’t have to. Probably the people that went before, it probably was expected or encouraged, for me it was left open.

In Sum, the majority of the students that I interviewed felt that their college experience is different than second generation college students. Some of the reasons that they gave were less parental support, more pressure, and less connections. There was one student who felt that his college experience was easier. The reason he gave was he did
not feel as much pressure because he was not expected to go to college unlike second generation college students.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to see who or what was encouraging first generation college students to cross the difficult boundary of attending college. The main conclusion that can be drawn from this research is that parents are playing an enormous role in encouraging their child/children to go to college in the first place. From past research the only researcher who talked about the impact of parents was Benmayor (2002) and even in her study it was only in one quote from a student, she did not say if this finding was prominent in her study. Although this finding might not be surprising for students whose parents had attended college because it has become a tradition in their family to go to college, but for first generation college students, their parents were pushing them into a world that they did not know themselves and would not be able to completely help them once they got there. These parents do not have what Bourdieu called cultural capital, in other words the knowledge base that people need to have to be accepted to a college and to know what college is like. These parents could not tell them what college would be like or personal stories. When asked, the majority of students said that no one told them what college would be like. They had to earn the cultural capital themselves because no one was there to give it to them.

There were also certain individuals who one would think would have more of an influence that did not, this would be teachers and guidance counselors. Both Fallon (1997) and Gibbons and Shoffner (2004), stressed the importance of these individuals in
not only encouraging students to go to college in the first place but also giving them the cultural capital that would help them get into college and also be able to become integrated into the college environment. These two groups of people could and should act as a model for those students who do not have someone to admire who went to college. Only one person in my study that said that a teacher influenced her to go to college and three students said a school program that they had attended encouraged them. If these individuals are suppose to be the one’s encouraging students to better themselves why aren’t they showing up in the research? The answer could be that yes they are influencing children but they are only a secondary influence whereas the parents are the ones who are really encouraging their children to go to college. The question that I asked was, “If you were to name the most important factor in going to college, what would it be?” so these other individuals could play a part in these students’s decision to go to college but may not be the most prominent. On the other hand, maybe these individuals are not encouraging students as much as they should. These individuals see a lot of students everyday and it is hard to give personal attention to every single one. This would be an important topic for further research because in order to get a high paying job you usually need a college degree and the educational system needs to be encouraging students to pursue that avenue.

One aspect that could have been important that I did not consider while I was interviewing students is the role of their siblings in encouraging them to go to college. According to my research 54% of the students that I interviewed either had siblings in college or they already had a college degree. Although I asked these students if their siblings told them what college was like I did not ask if they encouraged them to go to
college at all. This could be a very important factor because from what I have learned from my study is that it was becoming a tradition for siblings to go to college. If an older sibling or even a younger sibling went to college or was planning on going to college it could encourage them to go to college as well. Unfortunately I did not realize this trend until I started my analysis. This could be an important topic for further research.

Parents Occupations

These parents saw that they could only get so far with only their high school diploma and therefore pushed their children to get a higher degree in the hopes that their children could have a better life than they had. There were several parents that were able to start their own business. What is interesting is that of those parents who owned their own business, their children did not receive any financial aid from American University so their respective businesses must be prosperous enough not to need any help from American University or the government.

For those parents who held white collar jobs, these occupations usually need some additional training either on the job or additional classes that they had to take in order to do their job. When their children saw them taking additional classes to help get a better job this could have had an impact on the image that the child had of education and its benefits. The child would have learned that a person’s education does not end at high school; that sometimes a person has to be willing to go back to school in order to get a better job.
Phinney and Haas (2003) argue that 80% of parents' education was at or below high school level. For my study I found that 81% of mother's education was at or below the high school level. Father's education was a little higher at 85% of fathers having a high school education or less. This affects the kinds of jobs that these individuals can obtain and the amount of money that they earn. From my research I learned that the majority of parents either had blue or pink collar jobs. This is similar to what past research has found indicating that first generation college students were more likely to come from lower income families. The jobs that their parents held impacted the students as they were growing up because they saw how hard their parents worked in order for them to go to school and to have the things that they wanted. As Steve, the 24-year-old Political Science major from New York City put so perfectly, his father sat him down and told him that he was working so hard so that Steve would be able to have paper cuts instead of calluses.

Other Background Characteristics

According to past research, the majority of first generation college students were older and were more likely to be a member of a minority group. With regard to age, I found that the majority of the students that I interviewed were typical college age. Eighty-six percent of students that I interviewed indicated that they were between the ages of 18-24 which can be considered typical college age. As part of my interview guide I did not ask the respondent his/her race so my results are based on observation only. Fifty-seven percent of participants were a part of a minority group such as Hispanic, Asians, and African-Americans. I did not find a huge percentage of Hispanics that other researchers found. Only two students that I interviewed would I safely assume
were Hispanic. I did interview six students who were Asian which was not what Van T. Bui (2002) found in his study. He found that said 53% of first generation college students were Asian. Although only 29% of students that I interviewed were Asian, it was my biggest number among minority groups. For my research the biggest category was white, non-Hispanic which I categorized 9 students or 43% of students. University administrators should be aware of this fact so that they can better accommodate their needs and cultures. This is especially important because both Benmayor (2002) and Fallon (1997) found that first generation college students have conflicting roles in regard to family, community and college. Universities need to be aware of this problem and to assist first generation college students in resolving these conflicts.

Similar to other studies, such as the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) 1998 study, I found that the majority of first generation college students at American University lived off campus. NCES's study found that students lived in off campus housing 38.9% and lived with their parents 44.8% of the time. I did not ask where students lived I just asked if they lived on or off campus. From my study I found that 62% of students that I interviewed lived off campus although it would be safe to assume that they lived in off campus housing compared to living with their parents since only three of the students live in driving distance of American University. Of those two, one lived with her parents and the other two did not.

Faith in Education

The fact that these parents felt that with education, especially an advanced degree, would one day lead to their son's/daughter’s success shows how people in this
country feel about education. These parents who, for the majority of them, have not ever stepped foot into a college classroom, to put faith in the educational system is amazing. Why do they do this? Every year newspapers and television tell Americans that manufacturing jobs are being sent overseas where labor is cheaper. There are not many high paying jobs left for people without a college degree. These parents also understood what Robert Merton termed “cultural goals” and “institutionalized means.” They set certain goals for their children such as making a lot of money and become successful. In order to accomplish these goals, society proscribes higher education as an acceptable institutionalized mean so the parents of first generation college students encourage their children to go to college so that they will meet the goals that they have set out for their children. In order to ensure their children’s future success they encourage their children, even from an early age, that they will one day go to college. In some cases it becomes a life long pursuit. When the National Center for Educational Statistics studied first generation college students they found that “being well off financially” was given as an important reason to go to college 61.4% (1998:22). They went on to find that “give own children a better opportunity” was the number one option for personal reasons to go back to college. These parents and student see the goal of a more successful future and the means to achieve that goal is to get a college degree.

**American Faith in Expertise**

Americans seem to have a blind faith in experts. Some examples of experts that Americans admire are doctors, lawyers, and teachers. Parents of first generation college students are not any different. Since they lack the cultural capital of what needs to be
done in order to get into college they turn to experts who do have the cultural capital since they went to college themselves. These parents do not always know what forms to fill out and what else needed to be done for their children to get them into college. For some of the students that I interviewed their parents had not even completed high school so these students needed help at an earlier age if for example they did not understand what they were learning. Many of these parents saw this flaw in themselves and realized that they could not help their child/children the way they wanted to so they did the only thing that they thought would help their child, they hired someone who could. Although this is not an option for all parents, some parents were too poor to hire tutors, some felt that the best way to spend their money is to help their child in any way they could. This follows what Robert Merton talked about with regard to institutional means and cultural goals. Parents had the goal of a college education for their children but realized that they could not give them the means by which to get into college. This would include having their children take the correct courses, filing out application forms, financial aid forms, and college essays, just to name a few so they used their economic resources to buy/hire the institutionalized means, ie books and tutors. They also do not have the experience of what college is like so they also rely on these experts for this information.

Again these parents turned to professional tutors and counselors to help their children with the academic problems they may be having or to get them ready to go to college. Some parents did not have to pay for their children to get this expert advice. Several students joined programs such as Upward Bound which helped them learn the skills that they would need in college, fill out applications, and even gave them a feeling of what college life would be like. This need to rely on experts was not focused on in
past research regarding first generation college students. Only one student in Benmayor’s (2002) study said that he was part of a program and Benmayor did not go into detail about how prevalent this was in her research. This is an important area for further research because these students need to get help and cultural capital from somewhere and experts can play a great role in this process. At least three students in my study said that they were part of a program that helped them get ready for college and several more said that they had assistance from a college counselor or tutor. These parents and students realized that they could not do it themselves or at least where unable to succeed to the degree they wanted without the assistance of someone else with more experience.

**Respondents Sense that it was Harder for them then Second Generation College Students**

The majority of the students that I interviewed stated they felt that it was harder for them to get into college and adjust to college life than their second generation classmates. Several of them said that they felt intense pressure from their parents to succeed. At the same time these students did not know what to expect from college and had to figure it out on their own. They did no have what Bourdieu termed *cultural capital*. Going to college is a daunting task in itself but coupled with the pressure from friends and family, the lack of cultural capital that would allow them to adapt more easily, no one to turn to with questions; it is no wonder that first generation college students have a high attrition rate. There was one exception to this and that was Mark who felt that it is easier for him since his family did not know what college was like, they could not expect a lot from him. He was one of the older students that I
interviewed. He said that the town in Pennsylvania where he grew up, it was more of an option to go to college or to go to work. There was not as much pressure.

The idea that these students proposed, that it is harder for a first generation college student may not just be perception—it may be reality. There are certain things that a second generation college student would take for granted because they have the cultural capital that is required such as access to books, tutors, better schools, and their parents’ experiences. These are all things that may be harder for first generation college students to access.

**American University’s Lack of Support**

Since the majority of first generation college students have no one that they can really turn to with questions about college life they really need a mentor, program, or support group that will help them transition into college and be there throughout their college experience if they have a need. There are several programs set up at AU but some of them are not active anymore, such as LIFT which would be ideal because it pairs a new student with a faculty or upper classman so that they can talk about college and their goals. For first generation college students coming in, this could be beneficial because they might not have anyone at home that would be able to answer these questions. They might also be embarrassed to ask their friends these questions because they might not want their friends to know that their parents did not go to college or that they do not know an answer to a question that may seem basic to a second generation college student. These students need help with “doing college” which can be anything from helping with the application process, what is expected of them as a college student,
and what it is like to be a college student. This could also include things such as parties,
staying up late, "pulling all nighters", and joining clubs just to name a few. With the help
of other students first generation college students would be better able to "do college"
and to better adapt and integrate themselves into the college environment.

This is another form of cultural capital that first generation college students lack
because they may not have anyone to tell them these things. They are often just thrown
into a college environment with no means of knowing what is expected of them. Several
students also mentioned that a support group or special programming might also be
helpful when starting American University. They would allow first generation college
students to feel like they are not alone and to make friends with people who are similar
to them. This would allow them to compare stories, experiences, and fears. Just
knowing that there is another person who is going through the same experiences that you
are can help a great deal.
APPENDIX

Interview Guide

I. Name __________________

II. Year in school ____________________

III. Age: __________

IV. Where do you come from? ________________

V. What is the highest level of schooling that your mom had? Highest level for Dad?

VI. Do you have any brothers or sisters? What is the highest level of education that they achieved?
   If went to college: Did they go away to school or stay close to home?
   If younger or did not go to college: How do they view you going to college?

VII. If you were to name the most important factor in going to college, what would it be?
     (The way they answer this question will determine which set of questions I will ask next)

A. Parents/guardians
   i. Mother or Father?
   ii. In what ways did they encourage you to go to college?
   iii. When you were growing up how did they view education?
      a. Making sure school work was done?
      b. Checking homework?
      c. Trusted you to get your work done on your own?
      d. Can you think of any specific examples?
   iv. how did they get you ready to go to college?
      Where you part of any program?

B. Relative/Family friend
   i. Who?
   ii. What is their relationship to you
   iii. Do they hold an advanced degree?
   iv. Where they a first generation college student
   v. In what ways did they influence you?
   vi. What did they tell you about the college experience?
   vii. In what ways did they help you get ready for college?
a. Help filling out applications?
b. Help filling out financial aid forms
c. Going with you for college visits?

C. High School teacher/Counselor
   i. In what ways did they encourage you?
   ii. Did they talk about different options?
   iii. Write letters of recommendations?

D. Book/Movie
   i. Which one influenced you?
   ii. How did it influence you?
   iii. Did you relate to a specific character?
      a. Which one?
   iv. How did the book/movie portray college/higher education?
   v. Can you think of a specific scene that you thought was important to the way that you view higher education?

E. News Event/Economy
   i. What did it say specifically?
   ii. How did it influence your decision to go to college?

F. Life Event
   i. Someone close to you became unemployed
      a. Hard to find another job because of education level

VIII. Did they always want you to go to college or was it more about just doing well in school?

IX. How did your parents react when you told them you were thinking about going to college?
   A. What did they say?

X. Did your __________ tell you about his/her college experience?
   What did they say?

XI. Did anyone else tell you about their experience?
   -had they gone to a 2 year or a 4 year school
   What did they say?

XII. What did you think college would be like? – How did you picture it?

XIII. How is it different/same in reality?
XIV. How did you parents react when you told them you were going to American University?
   A. What did they say?

XV. When you looked at AU did you just do a tour or did you do one of the overnights?

XVI. What about AU made you say this is the school for me?

**Financial Aid**

XVIII. To what extent did the financial aid packages have on where you decided to go to college?
   A. Was financial aid the #1 factor or were there other factors that were more important when you decided on a school?
   B. Do you have a job other than school?
   C. Work Study?
   D. Work on Campus (other than work study)?
   E. Work off campus?
   F. About how many hours do you work a week?
   G. How does that affect your college experience?

**Location**

XIX. Was staying near your family a factor in deciding where to go to college?
   A. Did you family want you to stay near home?
   How did your family react to you living so far from home?
   B. Do you live on campus, off campus but near school, or do you live with your parents?
   C. How does that affect your college experience?

**Family Obligations**

XX. Does your family still want you to come home a lot to help (not including holidays)?

   A. Babysitting?
   B. Working?
   C. Give parents part of your paycheck?
   D. If live far away: Do your parents still expect you to come home during holidays and breaks?
Support System at American University

XXI. Are you friends with other first generation college students?

XXII. How many friends do you have that are first generation college students compared with those who aren’t?

XXIII. Are there any ways that your college experiences may be different than students whose parents went to college?
   A. Which ones?

XXIV. To what extent do you participate in events on campus?

XXV. Do you think that you had to give up a lot in order to come to college? (Opportunity costs)
   A. Money?
   B. Relationships?
   C. How have your relationships changed?

XXVI. What do you plan on doing after you graduate from American University?
   Grad school
   PhD
   Move to a city that is not home?
   Move back to city where you came from?

XXVII. If you could pass on some words of wisdom to incoming first generation college students what would you tell them?

XXVIII. What do you wish you knew when you came to AU?
XXIX. Is there any way that AU could have made your transition experience easier?

XXX. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your experiences of being a first generation college student?

If I have any additional questions, can I contact you?

Thank you so much for all of your help.
REFERENCES


