**Disparate and Congruent Perceptions of First Generation Student Needs: The Liminal Bridge**

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**Abstract**

To address challenges faced by first generation college students at Indiana University South Bend, research was carried out using participant observation, field study, and a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a qualitative methods class in the Fall 2012 semester. One major challenge, crossing from the working class to the middle class, and the obstacles this presents to first generation students, has been a widely addressed issue in educational research, as compared to traditional students and faculty from middle class backgrounds. This crossing of classes highlights a distinct difference in needs of first generation students in terms of navigating university culture, and accessing resources to meet, or reduce those needs. To examine this, a qualitative comparison was made between a first generation IUSB student sample of interviewees *( n = 23 )* and an IUSB faculty audience *( n = 38 )* responding to the screening of a documentary film regarding first generation student outcomes. Informant responses were evaluated according to instances of anomie, obstacles faced, suggestions for improvement and evaluation of campus resources. Though many participants reported varying degrees of satisfaction with campus resources, a disparity was uncovered revealing a perceptual conflict between students and faculty regarding the challenges faced in class-crossing for first generation college students. It is recommended that future research employ a longitudinal design to address various challenges faced by first generation students during the luminal period of class crossing during their undergraduate experience.

**Introduction:**

***“****Most of the time advisors won’t even remember your name; let alone what you are doing in school.” – Research Interviewee*

First generation college students face many challenges during their postsecondary educational experience. One major challenge, crossing from the working class to the middle class, has been a widely addressed issue in educational research. This crossing of classes highlights a distinct difference in needs of first generation students in terms of navigating university culture, and accessing resources to meet, or reduce those needs. Jensen (2012) suggests that elements of working class life are *invisible* to those in the middle class. The purpose of this article is to address how these and other needs are perceived by both first generation students and faculty at a Midwestern regional University (MU) in order to reveal possible gaps in the mobilization and engagement of academic resources locally.

As students move from working class to middle class, the transitional period into post-secondary education may represent a liminal period in which students truly belong to *neither* class, perhaps leading to a sense of anomie (normlessness), difficulty in identifying whether or not they belong to their family group, peer group, or other social groups. Until the student becomes fully integrated into the middle class by acquiring cultural capital in the form of educational status, cultural preferences, and income, this marginalized state in perceived belongingness may reflect one of the foundational issues that influence academic outcomes, retention of first generation students, and satisfaction with the collegiate experience.

Pasceralla et al. (2004) list basic knowledge of postsecondary education, level of family income, degree expectations, and high school preparation as being primary influences in first generation outcomes. Woosley and Shephard’s (2011) study indicates that university environment ( *p < .01 ),* and campus involvement ( *p < .01 )* were strong predictors of first generation student social integration in university culture. The importance of social integration can be examined in how campus resources meet first generation student needs.

To fill this gap, many universities, including the one studied provide academic resources to first generation students that are engaged at various levels and aim to serve as enrichment and support as a student progresses through their program of choice. MU offers several tutoring services, computer labs, a modern, large-scale library, counseling center, writing center, and student activity center, just to name a few.

**Rationale**

***“****I’ve been in school since 2002 (laughs), even kids who come back as non-traditional adults, it’s four years, and they’re done… but without any direction and not really any good advising, I took a lot of classes that I really didn’t need to…it was kind of confusing.”*

University culture can yield highly stressful, performance oriented, and anxiety-provoking experiences for any student, but possibly much more so for a first generation college student unfamiliar with the expectations of student life. In addition to this, first generation students face additional challenges with living independently, working (sometimes multiple) jobs, and raising children in the home along with the pressure of succeeding in their degree program. Thus, first generation students may be at high risk of attrition, not only in terms of class crossing, but also in terms of purely logistical challenges faced when pursuing post-secondary education. Stuber (2009) found that one quarter of first generation students experienced crippling feelings of marginal status, supporting the urgency of addressing first generation student needs on multiple levels including logistical needs, emotional needs, academic needs, and social support According to the MU student government association (2011), many students feel as if they do not have a voice on campus. This reveals a distinct perception on behalf of the students about how they feel in terms of resource engagement, environment, and involvement ( see figure 1.) and how that may affect first generation student outcomes. Considering high

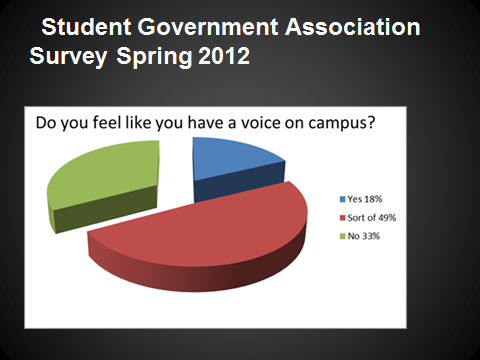


Figure 1: Student Perceptions

attrition rates among first generation students, this information is important to consider when evaluating student needs. This survey, highlights a distinct break between what campus services intend, and what actually may be occurring.

**Methods:**

To examine this, a qualitative comparison was made between a first generation MU student sample of interviewees *( n = 23 )* and a faculty audience *( n = 38 )* responding to the screening of a documentary film regarding first generation student outcomes. Informant responses were evaluated according to instances of anomie, obstacles faced, suggestions for improvement and evaluation of campus resources.

For the faculty sample, nonverbal behavior, proxemics, and verbal responses during the post-screening discussion were evaluated for receptive language in terms of acceptance, understanding, induction, and suggestions for improvements. This comparative approach was chosen to examine possible disparities and congruencies between the two groups regarding the identification and perception of first generation student needs.

Data were gathered from the student sample using face to face interviews lasting approximately 18 to 30 minutes. Students were asked 16 demographic questions to assess sample distribution, and 18 open ended semi-structured questions to address obstacles, stress, anxiety, involvement in campus events, and effectiveness of campus resources. Responses to questions regarding anomie, resource engagement, and suggestions for improvement were assessed for the purpose of this study. The student sample strongly represented white ( n = 14 ) female ( n = 18), working class (n =11), from a public school background ( n = 19), some with children in the home.

The faculty sample was evaluated nonverbally during the screening of the first generation student film. A proxemics analysis was carried out to evaluate what student-faculty groupings in the audience may reveal regarding the possible disparity between group social classes. Nonverbal data were gathered using a simple frequency and time data collection method, and were then entered into excel to generate a graph of nonverbal behaviors during the film.

Nonverbal behaviors were operationally defined and classified as follows: 1) Seat Shifting Behaviors: discomfort or impatience displayed by shifting of bodyweight, 2) Disengagement Behavior: Central Axis and / or directional gaze away from movie screen for more than 5 seconds, 3) Defensive / Dismissive: Crossed arms, downward directional gaze, upward turned nose / chin, 4) Receptive: Open posture, nodding, 5) Disinterest / Distraction: Occupied by another task, 6) Critical Engagement / Enthusiasm: Forward leaning posture, intent gaze, 7) Accepting Gestures: Gestures of acceptance, such as open palms, head nodding, and 8) Invalidating Gestures: Brush-off, head shaking, etc.

After the film, a brief discussion regarding content was recorded and evaluated for faculty perceptions. Problems encountered during this study consisted mostly of informants being unable to make interview appointments, some not having sure answers to certain interview questions, and for some, an unclear understanding of their own needs. Some of these problems may in turn serve as a simple reflection of the very problem being addressed by this research.

**Results**

*"I don't think I am similar to my family, they have no idea what it is like to go to school...but I am getting ready to graduate here in a month, and hopefully enter the workforce, then I'll be like them..."*

Sixteen respondents indicated a sense of belongingness, between both their family, and their cohort on campus. Anomie occurred in various degrees among participants, but was not mutually exclusive to, or predictive of their sense of belongingness. Some participants were heavily involved in campus activities, and though they felt a sense of belongingness, there was still anomie evident in their responses. Some, even with the sense of belongingness at the university reported disparities with their family. This may indicate that during the liminal period of post-secondary education for first generation the university itself, regardless of to what degree any individual student is “involved” with campus activity, may serve as a surrogate structure, which in and of itself fosters a sense of belongingness, even if resources are rated as ineffective, or only somewhat effective. This initially suggests the possibility that there may be no clear relationship between student’s sense of belongingness, anomie, and their sense of social integration.

Additionally, students reported varying engagement of, and satisfaction with campus resources, though the problem of insubstantial advisement was addressed by some in both the student and faculty samples. For some, this in and of itself, may represent a disparity in how first generation students are able to identify their own needs effectively. These results suggest that some first generation students may be experiencing something more akin to a fugue state, or loss of personal identity, during their time in post-secondary education. Recommendations given regarding suggested institutional improvements for first generation students consisted of items such as integrating university culture into a prerequisite class, additional foreknowledge of administrative policy, a peer support system targeted at first generation college students, and educating faculty on first generation student needs and logistics.

The faculty sample results indicated a gradual journey toward acceptance over time, as exposure to first generation student needs increased. Figure 2, below indicates that faculty increased receptive, positive and critical responses as the movie continued, and were highly engaged, critical and involved by the time the discussion panel occurred. Data were recorded by frequency in 12 minute intervals.

Figure 2: Faculty Nonverbal Response Rates

By the end of the screening, faculty were highly engaged, and made several comments regarding the outcomes of the students portrayed in the documentary film. One first generation student, present with who appeared to be her faculty mentor, responded with her story, and how valuable campus resources have been. Faculty raised the problem with advisement, but seemed to be more preoccupied with resolving the stories of the students in the film, and ideas and suggestions for faculty involvement came secondary.

The underlying assumption seemed to be that since the resources are there, then the university has done its part in meeting first generation student needs. Summarily, while faculty remained critical, engaged, and accepting through intervals nine and 10, student outcomes don’t seem to rely on negative faculty attitudes, as most of the audience remained alert to the problem presented.

**Discussion**

*“They will do it because that is all they deserve…”- Barbara Jensen.*

Even though the positive reception of faculty during the film screening, and student responses indicate congruent perceptions of certain aspects of university life for first generation students, disparities are present between faculty and students. This disparity appears to be more a matter of perceptual blindness between classes. The middle class, represented by the faculty sample, is overtly supportive, and seemingly ready to address first generation student needs.

Those crossing from the working class into the middle class, during this period of liminality, seem to belong to the university as a surrogate cultural structure, and also mostly perceive that their needs were being met. Informants in the sample reported that they wish they would have ‘known better’ how to navigate university culture. This type of attitude reveals a sense that struggles are expected, and rightfully so, considering such an evolution of identity can be rigorous and stressful. In this sense, it may not be apparent to some, that something is wrong, until attrition rates are taken into account.

Both sides are confronted with the profound challenge of seeing something that neither fully fathomed was there: a transitional class, whose needs are being completely unmet. Faculty and administration aim programming too far, into the middle class, missing the target that lay directly in front of them- the liminal class. Until the degree is earned, and career paths taken, until this student identifies as middle class, the first generation student is an unrecognized marginalized *class,* rather than just a student category (i.e.- non-traditional).

***Evaluation & Conclusion***

*“But there are moral values many working class cultures hold that indirectly and invisibly point working people away from the middle class.”- Barbara Jensen*

At some point between the break from the working class family structure, and being able to confidently claim middle-class status, the first generation college student exists in a marginalized state, being unaware of many resources, and in some instances unaware of their plight as first generation students. The cultural gap is not immediate, visible, or apparent to them initially. Not only are there things invisible to the middle class person regarding the life of the working class, but it also appears that there are things in the middle class that are also invisible to those coming up from the working class.

This two-way blindness opens a fundamental gap in understanding of both classes: once a first generation college student enters university culture, these students belong to *neither* culture, having crossed from one, and not entered the other, but also belong to *both* cultures, retaining or slowly shedding attributes, values, characteristics, and role expectations of the former, and slowly adapting to and adopting traits of the latter.

They are crossing the Liminal Bridge, and are a class all their own. It is this fundamental lack of understanding that explains why both groups perceive the needs that exist, and perhaps that those needs are being met, but are yet left wondering why the struggle of the first generation is so ponderous. The working class families also typically do not understand their struggle, the amount of work, discipline, and personal strength needed to cross the bridge. By both groups, the struggle is *an expectation,* something inherited, something deserved.

***Limitations & Future Directions***

*"Nobody told me that it was going to be this hard… I think there should be a support system that maybe senior or whatever first generation students should help… younger students.”* – *Study Participant*

This research was part of a much larger, less focused data collection effort, and many larger concepts were examined by other researchers using the same data pool. This limited the focus of evaluating the specific mechanism behind the gap in understanding between first generation students and faculty, but allowed for its extrapolation, and interpretation of the possibilities it represents. If this study were to be continued, a more focused set of questions involving cultural capital, cultural barriers, and questions focused on needs would be implemented to further define the liminal bridge between cultures.

Future research should consist of longitudinal designs, combining case studies, with pilot program research, designed to implement and test first generation-specific programming to ease the burden of this transition. Constructing such a cultural bridge may involve integrating campus resources in the classroom setting, providing user-friendly literature consolidating campus resources, university-initiated mentoring, or resource gatekeeper programs would be ideal candidates for such a study. Addressing the invisible “bridge” between working class and middle class culture may shed more light for both sides on how to better meet first generation student needs.

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