

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

Singing the First-Generation Blues



Jason Greenberg for The Chronicle

By *Dwight Lang* | MAY 18, 2015

A couple of years ago, one of my students arrived during office hours with questions about the sociology course I teach each year, "The Experience of Social Class in College and the Community." But like so many other first-generation students I have taught, this student's most pressing questions were really about her struggle to fit in at a university where most students, as well as staff and faculty members, could not relate to her experience.

She was upset after hearing a professor in another course criticize the work of those who cleaned campus classrooms, offices, and restrooms. And the workers who cleaned the grounds weren't much better, he complained. No one challenged him as he pondered the inferior work ethic of those who did menial labor.

Would students' reactions have been different, I wondered, had the professor grumbled about the workers' race or sex?

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

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The student left class feeling invisible and powerless. If she defended "those people" and disclosed that her family members did such work, would she put herself at risk? Would testing the professor's authority hurt her grade? Would she be stigmatized in a classroom where most students were more affluent, "continuing-gens" whose parents had graduated from college?

I call stories like that "the first-gen blues." They remind me of the Longfellow poem "The Rainy Day," which includes this line made famous by the Ink Spots in the 1940s: "Into each life some rain must fall."

In my course on social class in college, which I teach at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, we explore how first-generation students negotiate class terrain: how they might respond to disparaging comments about "white trash"; whether class differences are relevant during discussions of race or gender inequalities; and what students might say or feel when they can't afford to attend a movie with friends. This is tricky business at Michigan because many students believe social class doesn't exist or see it as a result of poor choices.

First-generation students can find a supportive place in a group called First Generation College Students@Michigan, which I've advised since 2008. It holds special significance for me because I was the first and only member of my family to attend or graduate from college.

In an era when it's unacceptable to complain about supposed behaviors and attitudes of women and minority-group members, few sanctions exist when working- and lower-class people are belittled. "First-gen blues" circulate freely at selective colleges like ours, where in the fall of 2013 just under 11 percent of students reported themselves as first-generation, meaning neither parent had graduated from college. Those blues are shaped by three interrelated elements: finances, family and community concerns, and campus culture.

Money is a constant worry for low-income students, whose parents can't cover most college expenses. Neither can scholarships, grants, and work-study. Loans and significant debt are inevitable. As high-school seniors, future first-generation students face inordinate difficulties in completing their Free Application for Federal Student Aid (Fafsa) forms. Summer vacations are spent working for wages instead of in unpaid internships that would add significantly to a student's "cultural capital."

Relationships with family members, meanwhile, are often complicated for first-generation students. Their parents can offer little advice about college life, and frequently worry about how their children might change while attending college. A son could start thinking differently when he comes home for the summer after taking a course like "Class, Race, Gender, and Modernity" (a course I taught a few years ago). Will Mom and Dad understand the need to move far from home to pursue a career? Will their daughter think she's somehow better after graduating from Michigan's law school and marrying a medical student whose mother is a famous

cardiovascular surgeon? This high-achieving daughter may be silently anxious about her own cross-class family structure and marriage: Will her working-class parents be able to comfortably communicate with grandchildren raised in an upper-middle-class home or easily converse with the parents of their son-in-law?

Unlike the continuing-gens for whom college represents part of a seamless connection between middle-class pasts and secure futures, first-gens experience four years on campus as a portal to middle- or upper-middle-class lives. They may learn new middle-class beliefs and ways, but deep inside they're never entirely middle-class. They're in-between and often uncomfortable. Many experience performance fatigue and are unable to publicly project the more-familiar, more-comfortable expressions and behaviors of their veiled selves.

Upward mobility, openly celebrated as the foundation of the American Dream, can produce emotional separation between students and their working-class families and communities. This complex sense of loss can generate insecurities, sometimes impeding academic achievements and requiring social and career adjustments during and after college.

The "blues" aren't easily discussed on campuses like Michigan. After arriving on campus, first-gens easily recognize differences. They hear fellow students tell stories over dinner about trips to Europe or Asia before high-school graduation. Sometimes another student might innocently inquire, What's Fafsa? When sympathetic continuing-gens ask what it was like to "grow up with nothing," many first-gens cringe, wondering how anyone could think that the first 18 years of their lives — years spent surrounded by a loving, supportive family — amounted to "nothing."

Campus life for first-gens might involve a work-study job like peeling onions in back rooms of dorm cafeterias. As they save every dollar for books and other expenses, many first-gens can't afford to eat out or move into costly off-campus housing because their share of rent would be too high. And how do they respond to theme-based parties (I have actually seen some in student neighborhoods) inviting revelers to come dressed as trailer trash or ghetto inhabitants?

Some first-gens just shake their heads and walk away from offensive social settings. Others might discuss hurtful comments with academic advisers, housing directors, department chairs, or other administrators. And some write thoughtful op-eds for their campus newspapers.

Even when a college's staff members or administrators act to confront humiliating words and actions, those endless blues persist. Even in the absence of overt classism, subtle class differences linger under the radar. Class is ever present for first gens, whether in the classroom, hanging out with friends, or back at home.

But those "first-gen blues" can also be a source of strength as students take risks, persist, meet others from different social-class backgrounds, and cross boundaries to new places where they can realize dreams and accomplishments.

Their considerable insights prepare them to live with purpose, and to become effective professionals, citizens, and parents who have firsthand experiences with class differences.

What became of my student? She graduated with honors and recently completed two Teach for America years working with preschoolers and their working-class parents in Tulsa, Okla. She's back in Michigan for graduate school, and regularly receives letters and notes of appreciation.

As that Longfellow poem tells us, "Behind the clouds is the sun still shining."

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This article is part of:

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