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# Invisible Barriers: Experiences of First-Generation College Student Navigating Academia

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## ABSTRACT

Twenty-four percent of undergraduates in the US are considered first-generation and low-income (Engle & Tinto, 2008), while TRiO student support services serve less than 5% of these students (Mortenson, 2011). Previous research reveals that these students are less prepared for collegiate-level academic rigor, have fewer financial resources, and have less cultural and social capital compared to their non-first-generation and non-low-income peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, 2007, Willet 1989). Based on their testimonies, are there specific challenges that first-generation, low-income students are currently experiencing while navigating higher education in 2018? How can these testimonies inform the development of support services for these students? This study explores the financial, social, and academic domains first-generation, low-income students traverse while also examining the existing systems that support them. Participants were recruited through the university’s TRiO program as well as word of mouth. Seven upperclassmen and one recent graduate who are considered first-generation and low-income from a Southeastern liberal arts university participated in 60-minute semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using Saldaña’s (2013) method of qualitative coding. Emerging themes of work-life balance and cultural and social capital are discussed. These findings reveal areas of support that could be built upon for the institution in question as well as other similar institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Twenty-four percent of undergraduates— 4.5 million students— are considered first-generation, low-income students in the United States. These students are 4 times as likely to leave after their first year, with only 11% of them earning a degree within 6 years (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In 2012, there was a 30 percentage-point difference in college enrollment rates between families from the highest and lowest income quintile (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Federal TRiO student services exist to provide a net of support to first-generation, low-income students in higher education, however, these programs serve less than 5% of the total population of these students (Mortenson, 2011).

### Definitions of First-Generation and Low-Income College Students

According to section 402A of the U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965, a first-generation college student is defined as “(A) an individual

both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree; or (B) in the case of any individual who regularly resided with and received support from only one parent, an individual whose only such parent did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, 1965, pg. 202). The U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, however, defines first-generation students as “undergraduates whose parents never enrolled in postsecondary education” (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

A few points should be noted about these definitions. Neither of these definitions include siblings or extended family members’ educational attainment as factors to be considered. These definitions would also qualify a student whose parent had an associate degree as first-generation. These definitions do not specify if the “parent” is biological and living.

This may mean that a student who had been orphaned at a young age would not be considered first generation if either of the deceased parents obtained a baccalaureate degree or above. These definitions do not account for instances in which the biological parents are absent from the student's life and the student is supported by extended family.

The U.S. Higher Education Act of 1965 also defines a low-income individual: "The term 'low-income individual' means an individual from a family whose taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150 percent of an amount equal to the poverty level determined by using criteria of poverty established by the Bureau of the Census" (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, 1965, pg. 202).

#### **Features of First-Generation, Low-Income Students**

**Identity.** There are several significant features and patterns of this population of college students that distinguish them from peers from more advantaged backgrounds. These students tend to be from an ethnic and/or racial minority group. They tend to be female, older, and have dependent children (Engle, 2007).

**Academic performance.** First-generation, low-income students tend to be less academically prepared for the rigors of higher education and earn lower GPAs throughout their college career (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Chen & Carroll, 2005; Engle, 2007). First-generation, low-income students spend less time studying, less time interacting with faculty, and are less likely to utilize student support services (Engle, 2007). They are more likely to be dissatisfied with their major, repeat courses, and take longer to complete a degree (Chen & Carroll, 2005). First-generation students tend to have "lower educational aspirations" as well as "less encouragement and support to attend college, particularly from parents" (Engle, 2007, p. 28).

**Financial resources.** First-generation, low-income students receive little to no financial support from their parents or guardians, and work part-time or full-time in order to support themselves. As a result, they are less likely to be engaged in personal and professional development activities (Cooke et al., 2004). As

the value of federal student aid is declining, unmet financial need among students in the lowest income quartile has doubled since 1990. The Average Net Price of a college education encompassed 84% of the average family income for students in the lowest income quartile in 2012, while the Average Net Price encompassed 15% of average family income for students in the top income quartile (Calahan & Perna, 2015). In other words, college costs are steadily increasing, while the extent of financial aid support available is decreasing.

**College readiness.** First-generation students are less likely to have access to information regarding the college experience (Willett, 1989). Due to financial and transportation restrictions, students from low-income families are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities during high school and are more likely to work part-time jobs to contribute to family income (Lareau, 2003). Consequentially, these students are less competitive for scholarship programs, leadership positions, and extracurricular appointments than their peers who have had robust high school experiences in leadership and extracurriculars. Students are also less likely to pursue extracurricular campus involvement until they feel confident in their academic performance in the college setting (Somer, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1994). Cooke et al. also note that first-generation, low-income students are more likely to seek paid employment than they are to pursue non-academic activities or socializing activities (417). Earning income to support themselves and/or their families may take precedence over building their resume. Internships and volunteering opportunities that offer no pay to the participant or even require the participant to pay a fee is not a feasible option for first-generation, low-income students who must devote time to earning income to support themselves, leaving the student with an opportunity missed. As Cooke et al., notes, "many students from disadvantaged backgrounds had to take paid employment to pay their rent and provide food" (409).

The difference in language function across class also impacts the students' success in college. As Lareau observed in low-income

families, “Language serves as a practical conduit of daily life, not as a tool for cultivating reasoning skills or a resource to plumb for ways to express feelings or ideas” (146). It is no surprise, then, that Pascarella et al. (1995) found that first-generation, low-income students demonstrated lower critical thinking skills.

**Cultural capital.** Given their lack of experience in higher education, parents of first-generation students are less likely to guide their child to take steps to be adequately prepared for college admission and culture. For instance, Engle notes: “...it is not unexpected that first-generation students report that their parents are less likely to encourage them to take algebra in eighth grade as well as less likely to be involved in helping students choose their high school courses” (29). Students may very well be left on their own to pursue college applications, which, without any guidance, may result in missing important deadlines or opportunities.

These students report having less support and encouragement from their parents: a result of parents’ suspicion of college as a worthwhile investment, loan aversion, and/or the need for additional income and the expectation of the child to contribute (Engle, 2007). The student may also grapple with interfamilial tension, or “separation drama,”: “For F-gen students, however, ‘going to college constituted a major disjunction in their life course . . . they were breaking, not continuing, a family tradition” (Terenzini et al., 1994, as cited in Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004). The transition from home to college is made easier when values, beliefs, and expectations are congruent across each environment (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004; Phelan, Davidson, and Cao, 1991). After the student has spent significant time in college, the student may find they are unable to relate to and connect with their previous friends and family members, and vice versa (Engle, 2007). First-generation, low-income students are also less likely to develop close friendships with their peers in college, which may even further inhibit their development of cultural capital and be a detriment to their emotional well-being (Engle, 2007). Once in college, first-generation college students may not have immediate family

members with the cultural capital needed to navigate the complex bureaucratic processes of higher education, contributing to frustration and attrition (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In addition to the tensions that exist in the family, the student may experience feelings of isolation among their peers. These students are “never quite wanting or willing to break with their past, even if permitted to do so, and never fully accepted, because of prejudice in the culture where they seek a place” (London, 1992, p. 7).

### **Strategies for Inclusion: What are other Institutions doing that has Worked?**

**Financial resources.** To ease financial burdens for first-generation, low-income students, universities can provide accessible information and workshops for families regarding financial aid processes, completing the FAFSA, comprehensive scholarship opportunities overview, unmet need options, and long-term planning (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Perna (2015) recommends that universities target federal TRiO programs, and other similar programs, to reach students with the greatest financial need. University faculty and staff need not overlook and underestimate the barriers of hidden financial costs of college admissions on low-income families, such as admissions tests and application fees. As Engle (2007) notes, “When, where, and how first-generation students, many of whom come from low-income backgrounds, attend college are all affected by inadequate financial aid and/or lack of information about how to obtain it” (p. 39). Therefore, efforts to increase financial aid options and increase the visibility of financial aid information for low-income families, on-campus and online, may be made.

**Cultural capital.** Cultural support strategies for first-generation, low-income students include need-based scholarship programs that provide social, financial, and emotional support for students to establish a sense of belonging within their academic communities (Means & Pyne, 2017). Social, identity-based student organizations, such as University of Pennsylvania’s Penn First program, also provide emotional support through the opportunity to feel solidarity in first-generation, low-income challenges. Through workshops and

events, these programs also impart cultural capital, demystifying and explicating the unwritten rules of academia. More intimate and individualized peer and/or faculty mentoring for these students also fills this role (Somers, Woodhouse & Cofer, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008). Means & Pyne (2017) found that “faculty were one of the most important variables for their sense of belonging within [academia],” study sessions held after class were helpful, and first-generation, low-income students felt more comfortable emailing a professor when the professor regularly emailed the class (p. 917-919).

## **METHOD**

The goal of this research is to identify holes in an institution’s support system for first-generation, low-income students. This research may shed light on invisible barriers that FGLIs face that go unnoticed to university faculty and staff. Of course, this study lies on the assumption that first-generation, low-income students at this university are in need of additional support.

### **Participants**

Data come from eight semi-structured interviews with students at a small southeastern public university. After completing the interview guide, the researcher obtained approval from Winthrop’s Institutional Review Board. Because it was the summer term at the time of research, the research team faced a challenge in recruiting students who identified as first-generation, low-income and were also living in the area. Multiple staff members in TRiO were contacted to help with recruiting participants. The researcher received names and phone numbers of students who had agreed to participate in the study from the campus’ TRiO office. One student was recruited via word of mouth. Each of these participants were currently living in the area during the summer. All students identified as first-generation and low-income.

### **Materials and Procedure**

The researcher opted for an interview format over a survey, knowing the participants may have been more hesitant to share information in an online survey, less willing to type and therefore given less information, and more easily distracted from the task. All interviews were conducted in an office on

campus, audio recorded with the participant’s consent, and later transcribed verbatim by the researcher. The one-on-one interviews, lasting 60 minutes on average, allowed each participant to explain with detail and depth their experiences before and during college. Each interview began with completing an informed consent agreement with the participant. The purpose of the research was then explained to the participant in more detail. Permission to record audio of the interview was obtained. Confidentiality was then discussed; the participant was informed that the research team would not use their real names in the research manuscript or in the notes taken during the interview, nor would their names be spoken by the interviewer during the recording. Finally, participants were asked if they had any questions before the interview began. The interview guide contained 18 guiding questions, organized into 5 categories: preliminary questions, physiological needs, safety and security needs, social support, and university experiences. The interview guide was refined after the first two interviews to include questions about parental educational attainment, the transition to college, and the culture of home versus the culture of college. Not all questions were asked during each interview, and many questions were ad-libbed during interviews. In other words, the researcher frequently diverted from the interview guide to follow-up on certain statements made. The interview guide was not strictly followed in terms of question succession. The interviewer always started with preliminary questions, but chose questions from other sections according to what felt natural to the conversation.

## **RESULTS**

### **Data Analysis**

A total of 5 interviews were transcribed and analyzed. Four of the five participants were involved with TRiO; two were male, three were female; three were African-American, one was biracial, and one was Caucasian (see Figure 1). Data were analyzed with Saldaña’s (2013) method of qualitative coding. After each recording of the interviews were transcribed, they were coded for challenges and supports. Going through one transcription at a time,

sentiments that expressed challenges in the transcripts were highlighted in yellow in a word processor. After denoting all challenges, the transcription was then coded for supports, highlighted in green. After repeating this process with all 5 transcriptions, all challenges were compiled into one document. The pseudonyms of each participant headed each section of challenges. Then, the researcher assigned preliminary codes to each challenge. After assigning all preliminary codes, final codes that are conceptually broader in scope were assigned to one or more challenges. Through this method of analysis, several major themes of challenges and supports emerged from the 5 interviews conducted, two of which will be discussed in depth: work-life balance, and cultural and social capital.

### **Work-Life Balance**

Most participants discussed how working as much as they do interferes with their ability to succeed academically, to insert themselves into the social community, and to get involved on campus. Amber, a junior social work major, discussed how working cuts into her study time:

Amber: “I would get off at 10 [PM] after going to classes that entire day... I was exhausted... then you deal with every kind of attitude that you seen in the world at Walgreens. Kinda like, ‘Now I don’t wanna study. I just wanna take a shower and then eat and go to sleep.’”

Amber also talked about how working interferes with her ability to study:

Amber: “When I was at work, I was like, I could be spending these like five or six hours studying. Or I could be working on that project that I kept putting off, but now I have to go to work.”

Another interviewee, Amy, explained how the need to work interferes with her ability to get involved with extracurricular activities on campus:

Amy: “I do work a lot and that doesn’t leave a lot of time for outside activity or clubs... .”

She goes on to explain how working impairs her ability to develop a well-rounded social support system at her university.

Amy: “I have very little social interaction at [university]... I haven’t really built any friendships since being here. I pretty much just talk to my family and my boyfriend...when I do have time outside of working, I kind of just want to go home and see my boyfriend or relax or something.”

Another student, Taylor, echoed that sentiment. When asked if she was involved on campus, Taylor responded:

Taylor: “No, not really. I would go to some TRiO events... I usually just work ‘cause I work Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Wednesday, Friday, sometimes Thursdays... .”

Taylor was also unable to pursue unpaid internships because of working.

Taylor: “Because... the internships mostly were not paid... So it would be beneficial, but then again... I still have to work.”

When asked what she would ideally use her summers for, Amber responded:

Amber: “Honestly I would have wanted to start like an internship at a nursing home... I would just love to have did something else other than work.”

### **Cultural and Social Capital**

A theme that was quite pervasive throughout each interview was the students’ experience obtaining the cultural and social capital needed to be successful in college when the parents could not provide it. Almost all participants spoke to this concept in some form.

When asked about his parents' role in his application process, Ethan responded:

Ethan: "[T]hey didn't really have role. It was all me. They just wanted me to go to college, but they couldn't really help me with it... My parents don't really understand a lot of stuff, so I go over it with them."

Amy, a Senior English major, echoed that sentiment when speaking of her dad, who'd only completed one semester of college before dropping out to serve in the military.

Amy: "And so he--it was really different back whenever he went to college, so he really didn't have insight into it. Didn't know what to do with it. And for the most part, I was kinda doing it all on my own."

Taylor, a recent graduate, also had the same experience with her parents.

Taylor: "I basically did everything on my own. If I needed help or asked questions, my mama... they didn't really know what to do. I just figured it out for myself or... asked my elementary school guidance counselor. But as far as my parents' role... it was almost [nonexistent]."

The majority of participants' parents had no college experience whatsoever, yet there existed a clear difference in how some parents responded to the lack of familiarity with the college process. Benjamin, a senior exercise science major who was involved with TRiO, spoke to far more supports, especially from his mother and father, than he spoke to any challenges he faced. When asked about his parent's role in his college pursuit, he said:

Benjamin: "They sat in the guidance counselor's office at school with me and tried to get waivers for application fees for college... my parents... had a meeting with the lady back home, and

they really set up a good situation for me to be in [Upward Bound]."

He also discussed how his parents monitored his application process.

Benjamin: "Everything I did online as far as [applying to the university]... they checked over it all... they were my personal checklist... Anytime that I needed to be up here [at the university] for TRiO or anything... they made sure I was here. They took off from work, they drove me up here. I never had to ask any other family member for anything when it came to the process."

Benjamin also discussed how his community played a role in sending him to college:

Benjamin: "So my mom... really didn't have the money to get everything I needed. But my church and people I knew around our community they donated... they gave me stuff... they gave me money... I had people buying me... just regular household stuff that I was needing to put in the dorm. So most of that was taken care of."

Benjamin was an exceptional case in that when his parents lacked the cultural capital, they sought it on his behalf. The parents of most other participants were less involved. Some parents were not at all involved. For instance, Amber's parents were quite hands-off compared to Benjamin's. Below she explains her family's promotion of a college pursuit during high school versus their hesitation once they were confronted with the costs:

Amber: "[E]ven though it was like everybody always told me to [go to college], I kinda got down about it once I realized...my mom wasn't going to help me financially or my step dad, even though they both have the means to, in a way... [B]ut both of them were like 'Well, this is you going to college, not us, so we can't really help you in that aspect.'

But at first, she always told me, ‘You have to go to college to get a good job. If you want a good paying job, go to college.’ And even once the price started coming in, [my stepdad] was like ‘Well, you know maybe you should take up a different trade or something.’”

Amber’s family was also less involved during the application process than Benjamin’s. Below she discusses FAFSA:

Amber: “When it came time to--especially with FAFSA, oh my god. My mom didn’t know anything about it. My mom didn’t have an email address...[O]nce it started getting into her business, she was just kinda like ‘Why do you need all this for *your* FAFSA?’... But she was...hindering the process in a way... .”

Amber also discussed other tasks involved in the college application process.

Amber: “But my mom and my step dad... no kinda help on college tours. They didn’t even ask me when I had any, like did I enjoy them... nothing of that sort. I had to *beg* her to take me to the [TRiO] interview.”

Considering all interviewees, Benjamin and Amber represented the two extremes of the spectrum of parental support. However, they were both able to tap into their social networks to obtain social and cultural capital. As we’ve seen, Benjamin’s social capital extended beyond his family into his community, his church members, and his extensive fraternity community. Because of these connections, Benjamin almost always had his needs met. Amber expressed much frustration over her parents’ lack of emotional and financial support, while attributing much of her success to Upward Bound, her godmother, TRiO staff and resources, and her sister.

Amber: “I was in a program called Upward Bound in high school, which

actually, I like to kinda give them props because they’re the only ones who like, really helped me get into college.”

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this research was to answer the following questions: Based on their testimonies, are there specific challenges that first-generation, low-income students experience while navigating higher education? How can these testimonies inform the development of support services for first-generation, low-income students?

The results of the research revealed at least two areas of obstacles of first-generation, low-income students to be addressed: work-life balance and cultural capital. Students cited working as a barrier to studying, getting connected on campus, pursuing extracurricular activities, and pursuing unpaid internships. Students also discussed a lack of resources and mentoring as a barrier to their success. Students who had an extended social network (family, friends, Greek organizations, extracurricular connections) spoke to more supports than students who had a limited social network.

This research sought to understand how these testimonies can guide higher education spheres to build better supports for this population of students. Considering university-sponsored supports, one could consider connecting these students with on-campus jobs that give them the flexibility to study while they work. For instance, some university residence halls employ students as desk hosts. These students are permitted to use the desk computer for schoolwork while they aren’t assisting residents. Other similar positions include computer lab monitors and library attendants. In addition to making these positions available, publicizing them to the student body, especially to first-generation, low-income students, would also be necessary. Students who lack the cultural capital of the university environment may not know exactly where to go to find a campus job, what kinds of campus jobs will be available, or even that campus jobs exist at all.

Focusing on cultural capital, students who participated in the TRiO program at this particular university cited the office and its staff



as a support numerous times. This office was equipped with counselor-type staff members who are able to give the students one-on-one attention and advice about their college and career plans and goals. Unfortunately, the students who are not participating in the TRiO program--or who are unaware of its existence--may not have an open, comparable resource on campus that is as invested in their success. To combat this, designated spaces can be established for students who need access to cultural capital. This may include academic advice, connection to certain resources, textbook loan systems, a place to report food insecurity, tuition advice and guidance, etc.

Further, other universities are building faculty and/or peer mentoring programs for vulnerable student populations, including first-generation and/or low-income students. These mentors will be able to provide individualized attention to students to guide them with academic success habits, financial advice, as well as connect them with campus resources.

#### Limitations

This research included an overrepresentation of upperclassmen at a particular university. Considering upperclassmen have had time to develop the skills and knowledge necessary for college success, underclassmen ought to be considered in tandem with upperclassmen. It should also be noted that only 5 students were interviewed, 4 of which participated in the TRiO program. In the future, an equal representation of TRiO and non-TRiO students ought to be included. In addition, a larger sample size will better depict the experiences of this population of students.

Diversity of the participant pool also ought to be targeted. Three out of five participants were African American, one was biracial, and one was Caucasian. The inclusion of other racial and ethnic minorities, along with minorities of ability and sexuality, would be ideal.

The research team consisted of only 1 researcher, the author, and the researcher's identity and experiences align with those of the participants. This may very well lead to interview bias. A team of two to three researchers to design interviews, conduct interviews, and code data

would bolster the validity and reliability of the research.

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## APPENDIX 1

Pseudonym	Year	Race/Ethnicity	Gender	TRiO?
Benjamin	Senior	African-American	Male	Yes
Ethan	Senior	Biracial (African-American and Caucasian)	Male	Yes
Taylor	Recent grad	African-American	Female	Yes
Amber	Junior	African-American	Female	Yes
Amy	Senior	Caucasian	Female	No

Figure 1: Demographics of participants.