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Influence of First Generation Status on Students' Perceptions of Faculty

Micol Hutchison

Abstract

While quantitative research has determined that first-generation college students (FGS) are less likely to interact with faculty than are their non-FGS peers, this qualitative study examines how incoming first-year college students, both FGS and non-FGS, perceive faculty-student interaction and whether they consider it important. Addressing different types of interaction with college instructors, both in-class and out-of-class, participants across a range of FGS status shared their

MICOL HUTCHISON

Micol Hutchison is Director of Program Development and Student Success in University College at Virginia Commonwealth University, where she also teaches the first year seminar, Focused Inquiry. She completed her PhD in

views through surveys, individual interviews, and focus groups. Focusing specifically on incoming first year students, this study finds that FGS described emerging comfort with faculty over the course of their first months of college. After completing a pre-college summer program, the FGS described a greater increase in their comfort level with faculty than did non-FGS, indicating that FGS were adapting to what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “field” of college and acquiring cultural capital that positively influenced their ease with faculty-student interactions.

Education, focusing on first-generation college students, in 2015, and is very interested in student success, particularly for students from backgrounds that are traditionally underrepresented at the university level.

Introduction

First-generation college students, defined in this article as children whose parents do not have four-year college degrees, are less likely to go to college than are the offspring of college graduates (Choy, 2001). First-generation college students who do enroll in post-secondary education are less likely to complete a two-year or four-year degree (Choy, 2001). Though research has shed light on some of the reasons for these phenomena, there is still an incomplete understanding of why they occur.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that first-generation college students are socially, intellectually and academically less engaged in college (see, for example, Arum & Roksa, 2011; Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella, 2004; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). One area of intellectual and academic engagement in which first-generation college students differ from their non-first-generation peers is faculty-student interaction, which is operationalized in different ways in different studies. For

example, Engle and Tinto (2008), Kim and Sax (2009), and Soria and Stebleton (2012), consider participating in class discussions and conversations with faculty, as well as asking questions in class, to be “interaction,” and find that FGS communicate with their instructors less than do non-FGS, are less likely to discuss class-related or other matters with faculty, and less frequently talk or ask questions. This reduced interaction may affect FGS' success in college: Research has shown that higher levels of interaction with faculty strongly correlate with improved student outcomes (Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Lamport, 1993; Kuh & Hu, 2001).

Review of the Literature

A lot is known about the demographic characteristics of FGS. Compared to their non-FGS peers, FGS are lower-income (Ishitani, 2006; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini et al., 1996), more often minorities (Bui, 2005; Choy, 2001; Terenzini et al., 1996), older (Benson, Hewitt, Haegney, Devos & Crosling, 2010; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Saenz et al., 2007; Terenzini et al., 1996), more likely to have dependents (Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998), and more likely to live at or near home (Saenz et al., 2007). While in college, they are more likely to work, both on and off campus, and to work more hours than non-FGS (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2008; Saenz et al., 2007). Compared to non-FGS, they also have more financial stressors (Mehta, Newbold, & O'Rourke 2011; Tinto, 1993). They tend to come from more tightly knit families or communities (Orbe, 2004). Academically, they are not as prepared for college as their non-FGS peers (Choy, 2011; Davis, 2010; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996), less likely to have decided on a major (Davis,

2010), and more inclined to choose a major that they or their families see as “practical” (Snell, 2008).

Challenges

Looking at different aspects of the college experience, an overwhelming body of research indicates that first-generation college students face more challenges in college than do their peers who are not FGS. Even when controlling for other factors (educational expectations, income, academic preparation, influence of parents and peers), first-generation college status is still a significant predictor of difficulties in college (Choy, 2001; Nuñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; D’Allegro & Kerns, 2010). FGS’ challenges are academic, social, cultural, and financial.

Because of less rigorous pre-college preparation and less guidance for college, FGS arrive in college academically less prepared than their peers for college-level work (Choy, 2001; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Davis, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996; and Pascarella et al., 2004). In addition to this, their critical thinking scores and self-efficacy—that is, their confidence in their own abilities in this new environment—are lower (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Davis, 2010). FGS’ academic disadvantages are compounded by their comparative unfamiliarity with the educational system (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006), lack of “active coping strategies” (Mehta et al., 2011) and reluctance to ask for help (Davis, 2010). All of these additional challenges for FGS may reflect a mismatch between the expectations of college and the preparation or expectations of FGS.

FGS often find themselves more socially disconnected from campus life. In addition to being more likely to live off campus, they also work more hours, and often feel

isolated and marginalized (Jehangir, 2010; Bergerson, 2007). This is especially true for minorities on predominantly white campuses (Orbe, 2004). This social isolation is also connected to FGS' less frequent participation in extracurricular activities and volunteer work (Hahs-Vaughn, 2004; Engle & Tinto, 2008). This in turn may lead to lower self-perceptions of both their social confidence and leadership abilities (Saenz et al., 2007).

Another aspect of the college experience that creates difficulties for FGS involves interaction with faculty, both in and out of class (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). FGS interact less with their instructors and are less engaged in class, in terms of both participation and asking questions (Terenzini et al., 1996; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Arum & Roksa, 2011). These quantitative studies have clearly established that FGS interact less with faculty. For FGS to be successful, researchers have urged colleges and universities to encourage student engagement, in class and out of class, and the research is clear about the value of this for FGS (see, for example, Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pascarella et al., 2004; Davis, 2010; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Family and Community Support

Many researchers have found that a family support system is one of the most important factors in a first-generation student's success in college. Dennis, Phinney and Chuateco (2005) and Bergerson (2007) both say it is crucial, and Coffman (2011) similarly reports a strong relationship between parental involvement and success. According to McCarron and Inkelas (2006), the level of education that a FGS aspires to is best predicted by the level of parental involvement and support. In a similar

vein, in a case study, Cabrera, Nora and Castaneda (1992) report that encouragement by friends and family plays a big role in retention. Unfortunately, many students report a lack of family support and say that, when it is provided, support is often generic, lacking the level of understanding, advice or enthusiasm that students desire (Coffman, 2011).

Virtually by definition, first-generation students must leave a familiar environment or community in order to attend college. In some cases, this departure might seem minor, as when a FGS lives at home and commutes to school, or when a Native American FGS goes to a tribal college. In other cases, the departure is more significant, as in the case of a FGS going to a residential college far from home. In nearly every case, however, there is a cultural shift to which a FGS must adapt: Coming from an environment in which college is not the norm and arriving in a place where fluency in the language of college is both expected and necessary, FGS must adapt, and often, this adjustment has to take place quickly in order for the student not to fall behind. Making first-generation students feel welcome and at ease despite their comparative sense of alienation is important. This can be achieved when colleges create an inclusive environment. Looking at retention, Tinto (1993, first edition 1987) finds that non-traditional students' involvement in subcommunities is helpful. Tierney (1992) puts more responsibility on the colleges, suggesting that the institutions should use an "integrative framework" to "offer alternative strategies for developing multicultural environments" (p. 616). In fact, in contrast to Tinto (1993), Tierney (1992) asserts that colleges are obligated to create a welcoming environment for FGS, and that they have to move away

from a model that pushes the FGS students to integrate or assimilate and move towards a model of emancipation and empowerment.

Faculty-Student Interaction

There is a strong positive correlation between faculty-student interaction and academic achievement, intellectual gains, satisfaction with college and retention (Lamport, 1993; Astin, 1984). These interactions include communication between students and instructors, as well as in-class engagement. Kim and Sax (2009), Anaya and Cole (2001), Kuh and Hu (2001), and Lundberg and Schreiner (2004) describe the differences in these outcomes for different students, based on race and socioeconomic factors.

Although causality has not been determined (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Lamport, 1993), evidence strongly indicates that, among different kinds of faculty-student interaction, interactions about course material benefits students the most, as manifested in improved GPA, intellectual gains, degree goals, academic motivation, and satisfaction with the college experience (Kim & Sax, 2009; Hearn, 1987). Some studies have found numerous positive outcomes associated with faculty-student interaction, but have not found a link to a higher GPA for first-generation college students (Endo & Harpel, 1982; Pascarella, Terenzini & Hibel, 1978; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977).

Research indicates that first-generation college students are less likely than their peers to interact with faculty, whether informally or formally (Terenzini et al., 1996; Soria & Stebleton, 2012; Arum & Roksa, 2011). For FGS who do report interaction with faculty, however, there is a correlation with improved outcomes to the same degree

as for other students (Kim & Sax, 2009; Endo & Harpel (1982). Through interviews, Wang (2013) finds that FGS derive and recognize significant benefit from their interactions with faculty. Chang (2005) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1977) connect increased levels of faculty-student interaction with a student's likelihood to persevere to a degree.

Theoretical Framework

The Bourdieuan concepts of field, habitus, cultural capital, and social capital are helpful in analyzing and understanding students' experiences in college, including their interactions with faculty. For incoming college students, the university environment represents a new field—an environment where certain rules are understood, and specific kinds of capital and habitus are expected. Bourdieu uses the term habitus to describe an individual's self-perception and disposition. A student interacting with faculty illustrates an application of a student's habitus in a specific field (or social context), in this case the academic environment. Cultural capital (necessary knowledge and skills) and social capital (one's ability to access a social network) facilitate these interactions. Dumais (2002) investigates the ways in which students are expected, beginning in elementary school, to possess certain capital and habitus, and how they struggle to succeed without it. This supports Bourdieu's (1973) assertion that the culture of the dominant class—which overlaps with the educated class—is transmitted and rewarded by the educational system. Student engagement, including faculty-student interaction, is one aspect of an expectation in the college environment.

Padgett, Johnson and Pascarella (2004) write that “first-

generation students are at a disadvantage compared to their non-first-generation peers given the deficit in cultural and social capital transmitted through generations” (p. 261). While this phrasing suggests that FGS arrive in college lacking capital, rather than possessing different capital that is less applicable to the new field, research to date does support the assertion that FGS have worse outcomes in college. My study, which examines how FGS arrive in college with different cultural capital than do their non-FGS peers rather than on the capital that they “lack,” focuses on a specific area where FGS appear to be less engaged than their non-FGS peers: faculty-student interaction. This reduced interaction is correlated with, and may be a cause of, FGS’ poorer academic outcomes, as measured by GPA and graduation rates. However, it is of value to frame the phenomenon not as a deficit, but rather as a difference. FGS’ cultural and social capital may be in no way deficient when compared to non-FGS but may nevertheless differ from established or assumed “norms” and reduce or change interaction with faculty. Importantly, because the educational system, from the elementary level—as described by Dumais (2002)—through the college level, assumes and rewards students’ mastery of the cultural and social capital of the educated classes, FGS’ unfamiliarity with these types of capital could put them at an unquestionable disadvantage in the new field of college.

Methodology

This study examines the perceptions of faculty-student interaction of both FGS and non-FGS, considering the influence of students’ first-generation status on these perceptions. The study was undertaken in three phases. The first phase, comprising the completion of

questionnaires and intended to provide background information and demographics from potential participants, had 36 participants. The second phase, which was composed of individual interviews, had 16 participants, selected from the initial group of 36 participants. The third phase, the focus groups, had eight participants, self-selected from the 16 participants in the second phase. In all cases, the participants were students in a voluntary summer program—Summer Scholars-- living on campus and taking classes for credit during the summer before their first year of college.

The sample in the second phase reflects variability in parental education level, as well as variability of other demographic characteristics. Following the second phase, all participants in this individual interview phase were invited to take part in the third phase, the focus groups. Eight of the 16 students from the individual interviews attended the focus groups. All student participants were enrolled in the same summer program, so were taking the same classes and, over the course of the summer semester, became well-acquainted with one another.

During the first week of the summer program, I invited students to participate in the first phase of the study. At this time, all students who volunteered to participate completed a written questionnaire (Appendix A) addressing their understanding of what is necessary for a student to be successful in college, and their perceptions of the challenges they expected to face and the ways in which they anticipated being successful. The questionnaire also included demographic information. The three questions on the questionnaire were open-ended for two reasons: First, this allowed me to see

whether student participants brought up any aspects of faculty-student interaction on their own when thinking about these broad topics; and second, the questionnaire was used as a starting point in the second phase of the study, the individual interviews. In these interviews, I asked students to elaborate on answers from the questionnaires that indirectly related to faculty-student interaction and sought clarity about their responses if necessary. The questionnaire also included a demographic portion, on which students indicated their parents' level of education. In this part, they were asked to provide information about their race, socioeconomic status (SES), gender, and language(s) spoken at home. This demographic information was used in data analysis, and also to confirm that participants in the second and third phases of the study were diverse in the demographic categories.

Based on the questionnaire responses, I invited 20 students, who reflected significant variability in parental education level, to the second phase of the study. Though variability in first-generation status was of primary importance, secondarily, I focused on ensuring that participants reflected a diversity of SES, race, gender, and language background.

In the second, third, and fourth weeks of the program, I interviewed each of the 16 students individually for 25-50 minutes. The interviews allowed students to expand on their questionnaire responses and guided them to speak further about possible challenges they anticipated facing in college, how they planned to deal with those challenges, and the strengths they perceived they brought to being a college student. Additionally, I asked students to describe the characteristics or background

influences that had fostered or inhibited their perceived abilities to succeed in college. I asked them to describe more specifically their interactions with faculty in and out of class during their first semester of college, as well as the factors that fostered or inhibited these interactions. Also, students were asked to describe the ways in which they thought their upbringing or family might have influenced how or how much they interacted with faculty, in and out of class. Finally, I gave students the opportunity to talk about whether they felt sufficiently prepared for college, and if not, in what way(s) they feel ill-prepared. While the participants' responses about ongoing perceptions and factors influencing their interactions with faculty were interesting and important, they fall outside the scope of this article, which focuses on students' perceptions of faculty.

The responses from the questionnaires of all student participants in the first phase of the study, along with the interviews from all students in the second phase, were transcribed and uploaded to ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis program.

Following the data collection and preliminary analysis, I conducted a focus group, to which all participants in the second phase of the study were invited. I asked specific questions about information gaps that had appeared in my data analysis, shared with them the research findings and invited them to respond to these findings and to make recommendations. The focus groups provided an opportunity for member checking as well as for participant involvement and personal empowerment for the students

Discussion

Students' Perceptions of Faculty

The individual interviews and focus groups, indicated that, in one important way, the first-generation students' and non-FGS' ideas about professors were similar: Both groups wanted to figure out and meet their professors' expectations.

The perceptions differed in one central way, however: how the students described and viewed their relationships—current or prospective—with faculty. Students whose parents had college experience were much more likely to talk about professors as if they were or could be equals. Related to that, students' descriptions of their relationships with professors also suggested a stark difference in students' comfort levels with professors. Notably, in this regard, the views from students whose parents had no college experience at all differed from all other students' perspectives on faculty-student interaction. Importantly, FGS' perceptions of faculty-student interaction changed over the course of their first few months in college, ultimately aligning more closely with non-FGS' perceptions.

Meeting Instructors' Expectations

Students of all backgrounds expressed a willingness to interact with faculty if they felt it was expected of them. This willingness reflects an important student perception about faculty, which is that the student's job is to fulfill the professor's expectations. For example, non-FGS Vashti described her attempts to figure out the professor's expectations at the beginning of a semester. She described being unsure of how much to participate in her classes on the first day of college, but that on “the second day, I think I had a pretty good sense of what

both of my professors expect as far as participation goes.” She then molded her in-class behavior to reflect the professors’ expectations.

Toni, a FGS, similarly based her level of participation on the instructor’s expectations: “If the teacher seems like the kind of person that appreciates that, then I’m more likely to.” FGS Stephanie also expressed the desire to meet her professors’ expectations: “I like to be a person that always follows directions in class and that always likes to do what the teacher wants us to do.” Like Vashti, Toni and Stephanie were not talking about grading criteria, but rather about a personal set of expectations from the professor. Though they described themselves differently as students, Philip, Toni, and Vashti (all non-FGS), and Stephanie and Toni (both FGS) each addressed the idea that they based their level of participation on what they determined their professor’s expectations to be.

All of these students, FGS and non-FGS alike, described a desire to participate if they felt that the instructor expected it. This may reflect their high school experiences—that some teachers expect participation and others do not, and that being a successful student requires fulfilling that expectation. Though FGS and non-FGS shared a willingness to meet the instructor’s expectations for interaction, this does not indicate the same comfort with faculty, or similar views of the hierarchical relationship between professors and students. The rest of this section will examine the ways in which FGS and non-FGS perceive faculty differently in this regard.

Professors as Equals

Students whose parents had college experience (including FGS whose parents did not graduate) described their current and future interactions with professors in ways that indicated that they regarded the professors as peers, or as potential peers, rather than as superiors. FGS, particularly those whose parents had no college experience at all, were much more likely to view their professors as superiors.

For example, non-FGS Rose, who spoke in her interview both about encountering problems with her high school chemistry teacher, and also about having close relationships with other high school teachers, indicated a great deal of comfort with interacting informally with professors in college. She stated confidently, “I personally will, if I see a professor or a teacher in a hallway, I’ll wave to them, and say hello, and I’ll actually go to your office hours, I’ll actually meet you and introduce myself, as a person.” She explained her motive for this level of interaction: “It just goes back to the notion that I want to be treated as a person, not just your student.” Thus, Rose viewed not only saw her professors as people, but also wanted her professors to view her as more than just a student.

Rose also indicated that she did not view student-faculty relationships as different from other relationships. For example, when asked, “How would you describe your interaction with your professors or instructors outside of class?” Rose responded, “I get friendly real fast. I can’t wait, and sometimes I cross a line of friendly, like I’ll get too friendly with people.” Perhaps significantly, she responded to a question about “professors” with an answer about “people.”

Adding to the idea of the professor-student relationship as a mutual one, Rose suggested that it is not only the professor, but also the student, who has to put forth an effort to make the relationship successful. Talking about the role students play in this relationship, she said, “You need to be open enough that you can be approachable to other people, [and] approachable to teachers.”

Like Rose, Cassie, also a non-FGS, easily came up with examples of how she interacted with faculty outside of class, before classes began and during the first two weeks of the semester. She offered one specific example of having encountered her professor earlier in the week, and wanting to remind him that she would not be in class on Friday because of a medical appointment: “I saw him walking across the street, and I kind of yelled at him across the street and told him I wasn’t going to be here on Friday, and he was like, ‘OK.’ I think I kind of caught him off-guard.” Retelling this story, she laughed at the recollection of his surprise, but throughout the interview, expressed confidence that she had behaved appropriately, adding that she emailed her professors regularly to “get some information...or to tell them something going on in life.” She concluded with, “And yelling at them across street? That’s something I do.” Cassie’s description of her out-of-class communication with her professor demonstrated self-assurance that her straight-forward manner towards family or friends was also suitable for interactions with faculty.

Vashti, who teaches dance and whose college-educated parents have been highly involved in her schooling, indicated comfort with both the formal and informal aspects of faculty-student relationships, focusing on the importance of balancing those two:

Yes, they are your friends outside of the classroom, but first and foremost they are your teachers. They are there to educate you and you need to respect and appreciate that. That whole logic has very much helped me in seeing my teachers or interacting with them in very formal and yet informal way outside of class.

Vashti's comment suggests that she does not see the professor's roles as teacher or friend to be mutually exclusive.

Kory, a non-FGS who also described numerous in-class and out-of-class interactions with high school teachers, indicated a desire to connect with her instructors, even if some did not seem very approachable. She said that she always looked for some way to bond, even if she and the instructor had almost nothing in common: "But what we do have in common: He's teaching a course, and I'm taking a course, and I will find something that makes a relationship out of a common topic." Non-FGS Kory, Vashti and Rose all expressed the desire—even the imperative—to establish relationships with their instructors.

When describing their experiences so far with professors, non-FGS were clearly more comfortable than were FGS, and seemed more familiar with the expected habitus. They also displayed certainty that they possessed the cultural capital of knowing how to interact with professors. Although my study design did not include observations of students' interactions with their professors, the habitus that I, as both a researcher and faculty member, observed generally matched the comfort

level that FGS and non-FGS described.

Showing similarity to the non-FGS, students whose parents had some college experience tended to express an interest in the idea of interacting informally with teachers. This may reflect that students whose parents had familiarity with college—though not a four-year degree—had spoken of college in ways that helped these FGS build up cultural capital similar to their non-FGS peers. It is also possible that this subset of FGS were more likely to have family members or a social network of people who had college experience, thus offering them regular interactions with college-educated adults. This in turn may have influenced the habitus of this subgroup of FGS, bringing it closer in this regard to the habitus of the non-FGS.

FGS Renee provides one example of how FGS whose parents had some college experience resembled non-FGS in regard to viewing professors as equals. Echoing some of non-FGS Rose's sentiment, and sounding comfortable in ways that resembled non-FGS Cassie, Renee—a FGS whose mother has a two-year nursing degree—expressed surprise when asked to describe her interactions with faculty: “[T]hey’re just people. So, I mean, outside of class, you don’t have to talk to them about class if they don’t bring it up. I mean, it’s more like saying hi to someone you know.” Identifying an academic benefit to this type of interaction, Renee also explained, “I really enjoy getting to know professors outside of the classroom because, like, if you are on a friendlier level with them, then it’s going to be easier to associate with them in class.”

Cristina—a FGS whose mother had attended college but

had not graduated—expressed comfort and interest in having informal interactions with faculty. She illustrated this by describing a recent conversation with one of her professors. This professor's cat had been ill, which she had told the class about. Cristina described how, the next day, "I asked her about her cat and she said, 'It didn't make it.' And I said, 'Gosh! That's horrible!' I really like those conversations." Cristina's conversation illuminated a desire to interact informally with faculty, initiating small talk on topics of interest to the faculty member. In other words, Cristina engaged in conversation with the professor as she would have with any adult or any individual. By pointing out that she really liked such interaction, Cristina indicated awareness that the professor is not simply "any adult," but at the same time, Cristina possessed a habitus—and confidence in this habitus—that made her comfortable initiating an ordinary conversation with her professor.

This level of comfort was also present in Toni's description of interactions with teachers. Toni, a FGS whose mother had not completed college, recalled her communication with teachers in her earlier school experiences:

It's actually really informal. Generally, teachers... I don't know if it's a 'me' thing, or if that's just the teachers that I've had. I just end up having really good conversations with the teachers. I usually end up having, not necessarily super personal conversations, but not necessarily teacher-student conversations always.

As did both FGS Renee and Cristina elsewhere in their interviews, Toni called upon her experiences with

teachers in primary and secondary school to explain what shaped her expectations for interacting with professors in college. Based on these earlier experiences, Toni suggested in her individual interview at the start of her first semester of college that she anticipated having similarly comfortable interactions with university faculty. Two months later, in the focus group, however, she admitted that at the start of the school year, she had been a little less comfortable than she had initially conveyed. She recalling the “horror stories” that she had heard about professors, and that she had initially expected them to be “standoffish,” “scary” and “rude.” Thus, though Toni possessed a similar habitus to other students whose parents had some college experience, her perception of what professors would be like differed from that of non-FGS. Toni’s initial perception of professors is similar to that of other FGS, as will be described later in this section.

Mary Lou, Jessica and Emma, all FGS whose parents had no college experience, expressed more doubt about how to interact with faculty than did the rest of the students, both in their hesitation and the non-specificity of their answers when they responded to questions, and in the answers they gave. For example, when Jessica was asked about factors that would make her more likely to interact with faculty, she answered hesitantly, ending her sentence with a questioning intonation: “I feel like it should be OK?” After a pause, she added, “Because, I mean, they’re people, too, so I feel like it should be OK to be friends with them.” Beyond that, Jessica did not name any factors that would contribute to her being comfortable interacting with a professor.

Mary Lou, who had mentoring relationships with

teachers in high school, gave a more elaborate answer, though doubt was evident in her voice, as well: “I think I see them as people now. So I wouldn’t be as afraid if I saw them at [a local restaurant] or something, to say hi or things like that.” Her use of the phrases “I think...now” and “as afraid” suggest discomfort but a growing ease with informal out-of-class interactions. This contrasted with the ease that students whose parents had college experience usually displayed. Mary Lou further acknowledged her emergent ease with college professors, saying earnestly but with some humor: “So now I know that not all professors are terrifying creatures to run from.”

Emma, who took advanced classes but described them as lecture-, rather than discussion-oriented, did not describe having mentoring relationships with teachers before college, and said, “I don’t really talk much to my teachers in high school.” Thinking about interacting outside of class with faculty in college, though, she expressed willingness, however hesitantly: “[I]f they’re open and like, you know, ‘How was your day?’ then I’m more open to talk to them.” In the focus group, Emma recalled feeling intimidated by her professors, at the beginning of the school year, which could partly explain her initial reticence to interact with them.

Fear of professors, even among those who indicated some comfort in interacting with professors, was specific to FGS. This reflects a sense of intimidation, and substantiates that these FGS did not see their professors as equals. For example, FGS Renee expressed concerns that her professors might be “super mean,” while others feared that they would be “overbearing” (Michael), or not “want to be bothered” (Mary Lou) or that getting too

close to a professor might be “creepy” (Stephanie). In the focus group, first-generation college students Emma and Stephanie, who had not voiced this concern in the individual interviews, both confirmed that their initial expectation was that professors would be “scary.”

In addition to Stephanie, Emma, and Mary Lou, the other first-generation student in the study whose parents did not have any college experience, Stephanie, described a slightly higher level of comfort (perhaps notably, she was the last student interviewed, and so had more experience taking a small class in college and interacting with her professor at the time of the interview than the other study participants). Stephanie recalled seeing her professor at a campus establishment and saying hi, but did not bring up any other possible types of interactions.

All participants were asked the same open-ended questions about interacting with faculty. Many students, like Stephanie, considered a very informal exchange that might take place if one were to run into a professor in public. Some interpreted the question to be about future friendships with faculty members. Other students' answers focused on office hours or academic discussions outside of class. Though no pattern emerged with students' interpretations of this question, almost without exception, non-FGS expressed more willingness and comfort with any type of interaction and often described an intention to initiate interactions. Students whose parents had less college experience were likely to identify only one kind of out-of-class interaction and to express more doubts and discomfort with any type of interaction.

Students whose parents had no college experience were less likely, in the initial interviews, to expect interactions

or plan to seek them out. This may illustrate non-FGS' greater awareness of what to expect from college, which contrasts with FGS' relative unfamiliarity with the field of college, and their related uncertainty about the habitus expected in this environment. Again, in this regard, FGS whose parents had some college experience often more resembled their non-FGS peers, while FGS whose parents had no college experience at all expressed views that contrasted starkly with the perceptions of their peers whose parents had college experience.

FGS' Emerging Comfort

In this study, first-generation college students, particularly those whose parents had no college experience, were initially more reticent to interact with professors than were non-FGS, and expressed more fear of them. As discussed earlier in this section, this hesitance might be explained by the fact that FGS had less familiarity with the field of college or the habitus expected in this field, and that this unfamiliarity inhibited them. If this interpretation is correct, then, as FGS gained familiarity with the field, presumably their comfort would increase and they would be less inhibited. Meanwhile, the comfort of non-FGS, who already had some familiarity with the field—or with similar fields—at the start of their college careers, and who already were comfortable with the expected habitus, would not be as likely to change.

Students' responses during the focus groups, which were held during their second semester of college, approximately three months after the individual interviews, indicated that this was indeed the case. Non-FGS, who had more comfort with the field of college when they began, were unlikely to report that their

perceptions of or ease with professors had changed significantly over the course of their first months there; in contrast, FGS—particularly those whose parents had no college experience—reported significant changes in their perceptions since their first day of classes.

Among FGS whose parents had no college experience, Mary Lou's attitude and rhetoric about faculty changed the most. She recalled that, when she first started college, "I thought all my professors were just going to be mean and rude and really scary." After a semester of college, she saw things differently. As she reported in the focus group: "Now I realize that most are just like regular people." In high school, Mary Lou had developed close relationships with some of her teachers and, though she initially had not expected that the same would happen in college, she bonded with one of her professors from the summer term. In fact—contrary to her expectations—she started referring to him by his first name. When this professor's course came up in the focus group, Mary Lou volunteered, "I'm still friends with [professor's first name]." She then explained that the professor often talked to her at work, since she now had a work-study job in the main office of his department. Mary Lou credited her experience with the summer program, in which she took a discussion-oriented college class with only a handful of students in it, for the comfort she now felt with professors in the fall semester.

Throughout the focus group session, in contrast to the individual interview, Mary Lou described a comfort with faculty and an attitude that was much more similar to non-FGS' ideas that professors were like equals. This view came out indirectly when Mary Lou described one of her professors this semester, who was "really rude to

all of the students,” and added, “It’s hard to respect someone and take them seriously when they treat you like crap.” This assessment of her professor contrasted with the deferential way she discussed faculty in the interview during the summer, and illustrated a new view for Mary Lou that faculty could be evaluated and regarded—positively or negatively—based on their personalities and not just on their professional status.

FGS Stephanie’s and Emma’s attitudes evolved similarly, though not as dramatically. Emma recognized that her initial idea that professors would not want to help was “completely wrong, because most of the professors here care about you understanding stuff and they are willing to help you.” She later illustrated the professors’ willingness to help by describing their openness to questions and to student consultations during office hours, both interactions in which she seemed willing to engage. In the focus group, Stephanie agreed with Emma’s comment about professors caring: “They really do want you to excel here...Like, in one of my classes, there are, like, 300 students, but the professor really wants you to learn the material and to participate.” These attitudes suggest that, over the course of the first semester of college, these FGS have become more familiar with the new field of the university, and have developed a sense of their professors that more resembles their non-FGS peers’, and that may in fact more accurately reflect the professors’ expectations.

While it is unlikely that habitus, which tends to be stable and slow to evolve, would change so quickly, one possible explanation for the appearance of such a change involves the discovery of unexpected familiarity with the field. An individual is likely to feel uncomfortable or out of their

element when their habitus does not fit with the expected habitus of a field. Similarly, an individual would be uncomfortable in an unfamiliar field, where he/she was unsure of the expected habitus. In the individual interview, Mary Lou, who had no prior college experience and whose parent had not attended college, expressed uncertainty about what to expect from college; in other words, she was aware of being unfamiliar with this new field. Notably, though, Mary Lou had had very close relationships with teachers throughout her primary and secondary schooling. It is possible that, once Mary Lou had had some college experience, she discovered that college was a field not entirely different from high school, where she had felt very comfortable.

In fact, contrary to her expectations, Mary Lou's experiences in college so far had resembled her experiences in high school. In both cases, she had a comfortable rapport with her instructors. In conjunction with this, as a result of working at the front desk in a departmental office at the university, Mary Lou had frequent, sustained interactions with faculty and staff, which may have intensified the speed of her adjustment to college. Thus, while Mary Lou's habitus was unlikely to have shifted as dramatically in the first three months of college as she suggested, she may indeed have displayed a change in habitus or a change in her description of her habitus. It may have been the case that Mary Lou had not accurately represented her habitus in the initial interview, perhaps because she had been unsure of how well this habitus would fit with this new field, which was completely new to her. Subsequently, having realized that her habitus was not in fact as different as she had anticipated, however, she might have been more likely to describe her "authentic" habitus in the focus groups.

In contrast to this subgroup of FGS whose parents had no college experience and who had initially expected professors to be hard to connect with, most students whose parents did have college experience said in the focus groups that their initial expectations of faculty-student interaction had been fairly accurate. Toni and LG, for example, agreed with one another that, although Toni might have anticipated that professors would be a little more “chill,” and LG had thought they would be a little less so, their perceptions coming into college had been mostly correct.

Thus, after a little over a semester of college, most of the students whose parents had college experience found that their initial perceptions had been accurate. In contrast, the subset of FGS whose parents had no college experience exhibited significant evolution in their perceptions of and self-reported comfort with professors, both in and out of class. This suggests that, although none of the students in the study whose parents had gone to college mentioned having spent time on college campuses before coming to the university, they felt comfortable with the new field of college, which may have felt similar to other fields they had inhabited. While these students' expectations may not have exactly matched their experiences once they were in college, the experience was sufficiently similar to their expectations, and neither their habitus nor their comfort changed very much. In contrast, FGS were far less familiar with the field or sure of the expected habitus of a university student, and thus initially expressed more reticence to interact; however, within a fairly short time, the FGS gained familiarity with the field and indicated increased comfort navigating it. While some FGS reported a change

in their own comfort, it is unlikely that an actual change in habitus could take place over the course of a few months. Nonetheless, the change in FGS' cultural capital and the increase in the comfort levels suggest that their habitus may be changing at a greater rate than it is for non-FGS.

Discussion

A number of quantitative studies and surveys indicate that FGS are less likely to interact with faculty than are their non-FGS peers (See, for example, Soria and Stebleton, 2012; Arum and Roksa, 2012; Terenzini et al., 1996). The finding that FGS are less likely to engage in faculty-student interaction is further explored in qualitative studies, including Collier and Morgan (2008), Cox (2011), Davis (2010) and Wang (2013). These studies find that FGS tend to be less comfortable with faculty and less sure of how to interact with them, though often students express a desire to engage in interactions with their professors. Cox (2011) and Wang (2013) both find that, in interviews, students report beneficial outcomes when they do interact with professors.

My study sought to add to this discussion by exploring whether FGS did in fact feel less comfortable interacting with faculty, and if so, how their perceptions of faculty might influence that. Overall, it seemed that FGS in the study were relatively unsure of how these interactions would take place, though they expressed a similar level of willingness. Compared to non-FGS, FGS also expressed less comfort with the idea of informally interacting with their professors. Because the interviews in my study took place at the very beginning of the students' college experience, the focus was on perceptions, rather than experiences. However, even in the first few weeks of

classes, students had had some interactions with their instructors, and these interactions had already influenced their perceptions. In the context of this study, in which students were participating in a summer program and taking both a small class with faculty who employed a learner-centered pedagogy, and a larger lecture-style class, the formal and informal exchanges with professors had made the students feel more aware of and comfortable with the idea of faculty-student interaction.

In the individual interviews and on the questionnaires, it was apparent that the field of college was new for FGS, in a way that it was not new for non-FGS. A disconnect between habitus and field generally results in an individual's discomfort and/or uncertainty about expected behavior. Comparing FGS and non-FGS, it makes sense that FGS, who came to college unfamiliar with the field and with a habitus that developed in an environment more removed from college, would have felt more initial discomfort in the new field, and specifically interacting with faculty. As the students became more familiar with the field, particularly if they found that their habitus was not as inapplicable as they had anticipated, their comfort would have been likely to increase. This seemed to be the case to some extent for all FGS, but most strongly for Mary Lou.

Certainly, Thompson's (2003) suggestion that a mismatch in habitus and field can lead a student to be "literally...lost for words" (p. 17), as illustrated by FGS' greater reticence to engage with faculty, seems applicable. This was more evident in the individual interviews, at the very beginning of students' college experience, when FGS expressed a great deal of

reluctance or uncertainty about how to engage with professors outside of class, than it was in the focus groups nearly a full semester later. Again, given all students' growing familiarity with the field of the university, this shift is not surprising.

Studying with a group of students—FGS and non-FGS—who were sharing experiences in a specific college program and who had relatively similar k-12 schooling (they overwhelmingly attended public schools, all had taken college-prep classes, and all had high school GPAs in the B+ to A range in high school) allowed me as a researcher to draw conclusions about how their FGS status had influenced their perceptions. Studying only participants in this program also presents limitations to the study, however, for it examines only a subset of the FGS population: All of the students in the study were voluntarily attending an on-campus program the summer before their first year, and all participants in the program were offered additional support which positively impacted the likelihood that they would interact with faculty. Created with the purpose of helping students feel more connected to and supported in a large, urban university, the Summer Scholars program was promoted to students as an opportunity for them to earn credits and get ahead in their studies, and to become acquainted sooner with the university and city. The program was intended to provide a supplementary, not remedial, academic and social experience to students. Relevantly, then, any student in the program—FGS or non-FGS—had intentionally chosen an opportunity to be in smaller classes, participate in outside activities, and get ahead academically.

Despite these limitations, the study revealed a significant

professional implication: All of the participants were enrolled in this self-selecting, intensive program designed to introduce incoming first-year students to the academic and social aspects of college and to prepare them for their studies in college. The Summer Scholars participants were enrolled in two general education college classes, both of which were smaller than typical sections of these courses. The students had regular contact with their instructors outside of class, including in extracurricular activities as varied as whitewater rafting and a cemetery restoration project, as well as in evening study sessions.

The study participants mentioned the Summer Scholars program often, particularly in the focus groups, and credited the program, and specifically the instructors of their small classes, with helping them become more comfortable with faculty. While intended primarily to help students adjust to residential life in college and to the academic workload of the university, this experience appeared to help students, particularly FGS, become more comfortable interacting with faculty as well. The findings in this study suggest that incoming university students could benefit from academic programs prior to college that allow them to develop relationships with faculty. A similar benefit might also be achieved through small classes and faculty advising during the first year of college. This is directly supported by Davis (2010), who attributes FGS' higher attrition rates at large, public four-year colleges in large part to insufficient guidance and to the larger classes at these campuses.

Related to this, the faculty in the Summer Scholars program were selected for their ability and interest in interacting with and mentoring first-year students. These

faculty members voluntarily participated in the aforementioned extracurricular activities with students, and were invested in the success of their students, both academically and socially. The approachability of such faculty, who were often mentioned by study participants, likely contributed to the growth in students' comfort with faculty. Tinto (1993, first edition 1987) found that “nontraditional” students’ (a label used by Tinto that includes first-generation students) participation in organized subcommunities improved outcomes. Though the Summer Scholars is not technically a subcommunity, it functioned similarly in that students lived, took classes, studied and participated in extracurricular activities together over the summer, and continued to have some classes together in the fall.

Prioritizing the teaching of first-year students, and exposing students early in their college careers to instructors who are committed to students’ academic and social adjustment to college, appears to have the effect of making students more comfortable with faculty. This is particularly pronounced for FGS, whose comfort with faculty is initially lower, but—according to my findings—seems to increase at a greater rate than it does for their non-FGS peers.

Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, and Covarrubias (2012) determine that FGS’ perception of their college experience is a more accurate predictor of degree completion than it is for non-FGS. In other words, a first-generation college student’s satisfaction with his/her overall college experience is more highly correlated with persistence to degree than is the case for non-FGS. Summer programs such as the one in which these students participated could be a central, positive element

in a student's college experience, and a potentially very influential one. Lowery-Hart and Pacheco (2011) suggest that university communities and prospective students are not as informed of bridge programs as they should be, while Engle and Tinto (2008), Terenzini et al. (1996), and McCarron and Inkelas (2006) advocate for more focus on bridge programs and orientations for FGS. Though this was not the direct purpose of the study, ample evidence emerged to conclude that programs such as Summer Scholars benefit all students, including FGS, who are more likely to struggle in their adjustment to college.

Previous research indicates that faculty-student interaction correlates with improved student outcomes. Kim and Sax (2009) find that it is connected to higher GPA, critical thinking skills and degree aspirations. Endo and Harpel (1982) find that it correlates with students' satisfaction with college. Soria and Stebleton (2012) determine that FGS' increased engagement in the classroom is a predictor of better academic and intellectual outcomes. Though these quantitative studies do not determine causation, qualitative studies such as mine indicate that students want to interact with faculty, and Tinto (1993) asserts that all students benefit socially and academically from more contact with faculty. Helping students become more comfortable interacting with faculty through opportunity, encouragement, and guidance would be likely to increase students' confidence in these interactions. This, in turn, is likely to increase engagement.

Though the participants in this study had very limited college experience at the time of the interviews and even focus groups, they generally seemed to desire interaction

with faculty. Taking a qualitative approach, Wang (2013) finds that personal interactions with faculty can be very beneficial to students. According to the research, FGS participants were able to identify ways in which interaction with faculty helped them with major academic and personal transitions. Wang's findings strengthen my proposal that all students—and especially FGS—should be guided and provided opportunity for interacting with faculty. Even though the participants of my study indicated that they would be most likely to interact with faculty in order to clarify assignments or for grade-related reasons, a finding also detailed by Cox (2011), such superficial interactions could potentially lead to deeper relationships, which could influence students' trajectories in school, work, and life. In this study, FGS made it clear that they wanted to interact with faculty, but were not sure how to do that. Future research could look at how faculty members help all students, but perhaps especially FGS, establish closer academic and personal connections with faculty. Opportunities that often appear later in students' college careers such as research and internships could be structured to instead provide an avenue for students to create these relationships with faculty at the start of college. Additional research could examine where this has successfully been done, and how.

The FGS in this study suggested that they were less likely than their non-FGS peers to interact with faculty or to imagine closer, more equal, relationships with their professors. Understanding students' perceptions of faculty and the origins of those perceptions, and—perhaps most importantly—being aware of the encouragements and impediments that students identify to faculty-student interaction, could help faculty to be

more accessible and approachable and could help students become more comfortable.

Overall, the findings of this study should bring hope to university communities, as they suggest that FGS—and other students who enroll in college and face challenges similar to those that FGS encounter—have willingness, eagerness and resourcefulness that will benefit them tremendously in college. Offered adequate information and support, FGS come to college with crucial tools for success. The participants of this study also illustrate how, with opportunity, FGS can learn skills that are important or crucial for success in college, which they might not have acquired prior to college.

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