

THE INVISIBILITY FACTOR

THE INVISIBILITY FACTOR
ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY
REACH OUT TO FIRST-GENERATION
COLLEGE STUDENTS

Edited by

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&
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*The Invisibility Factor:
Administrators and Faculty Reach Out to First-Generation College Students*

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♦ FOREWORD ♦

**ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY REACH OUT
TO FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS**

Melissa Ballard

At extended family gatherings when I was a young adult, my dad would often call to me across the room. “Hey, Melissa, you went to college.” This was a noteworthy comment because I was the first in my family to do so. After the silence that inevitably followed, he asked me to verify an obscure fact or come up with the answer to a question unrelated to my field of study. I think he did it partly to brag, but also to remind me that I still didn’t know everything. At some level I’m sure he wondered if the cost and time involved in my liberal arts education were worth it.

During my college days, I never thought about the fact that I was a first-generation student. In part, this might have been because I attended a large state school where the background of many of the students was similar to my own. But I do remember, vividly, talking to students who were mysteriously knowledgeable about scholarships, grants, internships, how to effectively communicate with professors, and how to study efficiently while making it all look easy. I knew none of these things. In fact, until I began to work in Student Academic Services at Oberlin College some fourteen years ago, and learned that we provide focused services to students who are first-generation, I was not even aware of the term.

Working in student support services at a small liberal arts college, I have seen over and over again how vital it is for first-generation students to have support as they, literally, work their way through college. We offer academic success workshops; credit-

bearing courses in study and reading strategies, mathematics and communication skills; and individual tutoring. While these services are available to all students, an additional effort is made to reach out to first-generation students in the form of special advising (one-on-one meetings with staff members to discuss a variety of issues related to academics and general well-being) and a peer-mentoring program. Our first-generation students seem to be extremely mature and capable, but they very much benefit from having people who will listen to their stories, understand their unique challenges, and guide them through the sometimes mysterious, confusing, and intimidating halls of academe.

In May of 2006, I felt as though I had come full circle when I sat on Oberlin College's Commencement platform in my role of class dean for the seniors. It was one of the hottest, most humid May days on record for Northeast Ohio—not the ideal time to be wearing a long, scratchy, black robe. The heat was worth it, though, to watch the Class of 2006—which included my daughter—walk across the stage to accept their diplomas. I knew most of the students, including many who were first-generation. I also knew some of their struggles, in part because they were once my own: family members who wonder aloud when they will get a “real” job, constant money worries, and the feeling of always being unprepared when compared to one's peers. But I also knew that as those graduates walked off that stage, they felt exultant. And I believe their education will lead them to yet unimagined people, places, and rich experiences, as mine has done for me.

While sitting on that stage, and in spare moments since, I've reflected on the ways in which my work has been informed by the expertise of my colleagues and the student mentors who work in our department; many of them are first-generation. I have also been able to draw on my own college experiences, uninformed as they were at the time. In terms of written material, I have found many helpful resources, but no single volume that could serve as a comprehensive reference for working with first-generation students.

I am, therefore, extremely pleased to be introducing this book. The authors represent faculty and staff, many of them former first-generation students, as well as current students. I'm convinced that *The Invisibility Factor: Administrators and Faculty Reach Out to First-Generation College Students* will quickly become an essential resource for college personnel, as it contains both a thorough examination of issues faced by first-generation students in the academy and a myriad

of practical, research-based suggestions for meeting those needs through teaching, programming, and individual support.

In Section I (Chapters 1-3), Chapter 1 the editors provide an overview of the first-generation student population, a brief literature review that addresses potential obstacles for students, and a discussion of the scope and purpose of the book. Chapters 2 and 3 include specific suggestions for supporting first-generation students in the classroom while also addressing issues of social class. In Section II (Chapters 4 through 10) readers are offered multiple approaches to providing institutional support for first-generation students as they attempt to acclimate academically, socially, and personally to the culture of the academy. This section includes descriptions of specific programs, including peer mentoring. Chapter 10 summarizes the book's content and makes additional recommendations for providing effective first-generation services. Personal narratives form a thread that is woven throughout the text, clarifying and enriching the theories and proposals that are outlined.

When Teresa and Vickie invited me to write this foreword, I had what might be considered a typical first-generation reaction: I was simultaneously thrilled and horrified. Me? Write something for a scholarly text? Despite having worked in higher education for many years, part of me will always feel like something of an outsider. But my education continues to afford me new and exciting opportunities, and this is one of them. So, when I look back on my dad's unstated question my answer is, "Yes, Dad, I went to college. And it *was* worth it." This book will assist all of us in guiding first-generation students on this most worthwhile of journeys.

Melissa Ballard
Oberlin, Ohio
September 2009

Portions of this foreword appeared in the Summer 2006 edition of the *Oberlin Alumni Magazine*.

♦ SECTION I ♦

**INTRODUCTION AND
PEDAGOGICAL FOUNDATIONS**

♦ CHAPTER ONE ♦

**INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW OF
BOOK'S OBJECTIVES**

Teresa Heinz Housel and Vickie L. Harvey

This book responds to an increasing student population that is all too often underserved and unrecognized. First-generation students (or FGS, whose parents do not have a bachelor's or an associate degree) are enrolling at American colleges and universities at steadily increasing rates. According to a 2007 study by the University of California-Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute, nearly one in six freshmen at American four-year institutions are FGS (Saenz, Hurtado, Barrera, Wolf & Yeung, 2007).

The efforts of institutions to recruit more low-income students (who are often first-generation) represent part of this enrollment increase. As the number of first-generation applicants to higher education institutions increases, institutions face public criticism about rising tuition costs and questions about accessibility for low-income students.

In December 2007, Harvard University, which has a \$35 billion endowment, announced it would replace student loans with grants for families earning less than \$180,000 a year (Kinzie, 2007, p. A08). The new program ensures that students from families earning less than \$60,000 a year would likely pay nothing to attend Harvard. According to Jan's (2009) *Boston Globe* article, "The Harvard Disadvantage," about the university's financial aid initiative, the number of Harvard students from families with annual incomes below \$60,000 has risen 30 percent (or one-fifth of all Harvard students) during the past five years (p. 1).

Similar to the Harvard initiative, Oberlin College announced its new Oberlin Access Initiative program in April 2008. The program replaces student loans with grants for incoming first-year students eligible for federally funded Pell Grants. The program will also eliminate loans for current, Pell-eligible students at Oberlin. These students often come from families earning less than \$35,000 annually (Bader, 2008, p. 14). Describing the new program, Oberlin College President Marvin Krislov said, “There has been a sea change in the way colleges are thinking about financial aid. Access has become a major public policy issue” (Bader, p. 12). The financial aid initiatives operated by Harvard and other institutions underscore the almost absolute necessity for a college degree in today’s economic climate.

Not Just Access:

Barriers to Success for First-Generation College Students

Today’s students are up against an economic downfall in which employers can demand that new hires have a bachelor’s degree. It is not necessarily that employers value what the student learned, just that the student has a degree. For potential employees, the college degree is a no-cost screening device for detecting the bright and ambitious who have perseverance and would make better employees. The more people who go to college, the more it makes sense for employers to require a college degree. However, where does this leave the FGS if they are to stay marketable and dare we add, educated?

Although financial aid programs help level out unequal access to higher education, the programs are just part of the overall equation because many FGS face additional barriers to academic success when they enter an unfamiliar academic culture. To help FGS better culturally adapt to the campus environment, Harvard recently began initiatives such as a fund to help such students pay for incidental expenses for social activities, clothes, and travel home. Although first-generation Harvard students might feel intellectually comfortable, students interviewed by Jan (2009) describe the “minefield of class chasms on a campus still brimming with legacies and wealth” (p. 1). Jan discussed the university’s difficulty of identifying the neediest students because some are embarrassed to reveal their socio-economic circumstances.

Of course, the specific difficulties experienced by FGS are nuanced depending on their campus environments, which widely range across private liberal arts colleges, community colleges, and large universities in urban and rural settings. However, education

researchers document how FGS enter college with more potential barriers to achievement than non-FGS. Researchers identify how FGS frequently lack reading, writing, and oral communication skills, which can translate into poor retention rates (Ryan & Glenn, 2002/2003; Reid & Moore, 2008). Other studies indicate that FGS take part in fewer extracurricular organizations, campus cultural programs, internships, and career networking activities than their peers from middle- and upper-class economic backgrounds (Glenn, 2004; Moschetti & Hudley, 2008). Additionally, FGS typically have lower levels of parental involvement in their education and they carry the burden of financial worries (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Bui, 2002).

Moreover, many FGS feel socially, ethnically, and emotionally marginalized on campus (Francis & Miller, 2008; Bui, 2002; Lundberg, Schreiner, Hovaguimian & Miller, 2007). These challenges are usually the most difficult for institutions to identify because they typically result from unspoken cultural expectations and social mores. FGS often lack social capital, such as overseas travel and exposure to cultural arts that wealthier students might take for granted. FGS must often navigate the unwritten social rules of their peers, professors, and academic administrators, many of whom come from middle- and upper-class backgrounds (Lubrano, 2004).

Struggles That Have No Boundaries: Two Famous First-Generation Students

Examples from the experiences of two famous public figures, who were also FGS, especially confirm how these students face common academic and emotional struggles.

Shortly after U.S. President Barack Obama nominated Sonia Sotomayor as a Supreme Court Justice in May 2009, *The New York Times* printed a lengthy feature that traced Sotomayor's journey from the East Bronx projects to her climb up the legislative ladder as attorney and judge.

Stolberg's (2009) *New York Times* article poignantly noted Sotomayor's college experience at Princeton, where she was a history major in the 1970s. Kenneth K. Roy, a childhood friend who encouraged Sotomayor to attend Princeton, gave her a warning about what to expect at the elite institution: "I told her I don't want you to come here with any illusions. Social isolation is going to be a part of your experience, and you have to have the strength of character to get through that" (Stolberg, p. A18)

When Sotomayor began college classes in the fall of 1972, she was outnumbered in both ethnicity and gender. Although she had been valedictorian of her larger urban high school, she described the feeling of being suddenly out of place among her classmates. According to Stolberg's (2009) article, Sotomayor confessed to a Yale Law School friend that "she could 'barely write' when she arrived at Princeton" (p. A18). She rarely raised her hand in class discussions and spent summers "inhaling children's classics, grammar books and literature that many Princeton peers had already conquered at Choate or Exeter" (Stolberg, p. A18).

Sotomayor's college experience resonates with those of Hillary Rodham Clinton, U.S. Secretary of State and former presidential candidate. In her autobiography, *Living History* (2003), Clinton recounts the day her parents dropped her off at Wellesley College. "I arrived at Wellesley carrying my father's political beliefs and my mother's dreams and left with the beginnings of my own," recounts Clinton. "But on that first day, as my parents drove away, I felt lonely, overwhelmed and out of place" among students who had attended private boarding schools, traveled abroad, and spoke other languages (p. 27).

Similar to other FGS, Clinton initially struggled in her college courses. As she recalls, "I didn't hit my stride as a Wellesley student right away" (Clinton, 2003, p. 27). After a month of school, Clinton phoned home and told her parents that she was not smart enough to be there. Clinton's father, Hugh Rodham, said that she could come home while her mother, Dorothy, insisted that she not give up. Clinton took her mother's advice: "After a shaky start, the doubts faded, and I realized that I really couldn't go home again, so I might as well make a go of it" (Clinton, p. 28).

It was only several months later, during the winter, when Clinton (2003) realized that she was going to survive at Wellesley. The college president, Margaret Clapp, visited Clinton's dorm and invited her and other students to shake the snow off nearby trees so the branches wouldn't break under the snow's weight. "We walked from tree to tree through knee-high snow under a clear sky filled with stars, led by a strong, intelligent woman alert to the surprises and vulnerabilities of nature," remembers Clinton. "I decided that night that I had found the place where I belonged" (p. 28).

Sotomayor, Clinton, this volume's co-editors, and many chapter authors navigated the unfamiliar social codes and academic requirements of college. We managed through sheer hard work and cou-

rage. Once we found our footing, we asked questions and created our own support networks independent of our families who could not always give us the type of advice we needed. Like many FGS, we may have lacked college preparation, but we possessed survival skills in spades.

Research Informed by Experience: Scholars as FGS Students

Experiences of survival and cultural transition motivate many of this book's contributing authors, who bring important personal and scholarly expertise to their work. The authors include faculty, administrators, support services personnel, and former students at private liberal arts colleges, major research universities, community colleges, and comprehensive universities in urban and rural settings. The diverse perspectives represented in the essays will benefit administrators and staff working at diverse types of institutions with FGS.

Socio-economic background profoundly shapes a person's cultural transition into college and heavily determines what barriers to academic success he or she will face. Many authors in this collection were FGS who made the transition into a foreign academic culture. This book's co-editors, Vickie Harvey and Teresa Heinz Housel, begin by briefly describing our experiences at two very different academic institutions, which nonetheless presented us with distinct social, economic, and academic challenges common to FGS.

Vickie Harvey

I remember being 26 years old and having a conversation with my best friend that changed the trajectory of my life.

Paula: "What are you doing this afternoon?"

Me: "Nothing."

Paula: "Come to class with me. My women's studies teacher is really cool and we talk about great stuff."

Me: "Are you allowed to bring someone to class?"

Paula: "Sure."

Me: "Okay."

Hence began my love of academic learning. I didn't enroll the same day I visited her class because I had to wait for that semester to end and the next to begin. At age 27, I took my first college course

and in four years earned my B.A. I continued on for my master's and debated going the final step to earn a Ph.D. My mother said, "There's more? I thought you already had your degree? There's another degree you need to be a teacher?"

Yes, I am a first-generation college student and I am finishing my 19th year of teaching college. I am proud to have returned to college at age 27 as a nontraditional FGS and continued until I earned enough degrees to become a teacher (as my mother would say).

Teresa Heinz Housel

Even though my immediate family environment was not conducive to attending college, I always gravitated toward learning. As a child I spent hours looking at world maps and reading encyclopedias, imagining the places I would explore. My innate desire to learn set me apart from my peers at a rural public school. Similar to many other children in this situation, I was socially ostracized, and that experience later fueled my interest in cultural studies and passionate activist spirit on behalf of people who are silenced.

I knew from the many books that I read that there was a much larger world beyond the one where I grew up. That awareness led me to Oberlin College, where I finally was surrounded by other young people who shared my love for learning. However, in college I sometimes experienced a nameless anxiety. My wealthier classmates all seemed to have assumed experiences such as international travel, knowledge of the fine arts, and prep school educations.

Even though I was bright, I struggled to catch up academically with my peers during my first year of college. The experience perplexed and frustrated me because I studied diligently. To describe just a couple examples, I had long enjoyed my high school history classes, but I was stunned to receive a C- on my first college history essay exam. In my rural high school, where history classes were usually taught by the school's athletic director with little or no historical training, I had learned history only as memorized facts, not as a narrative with varying conflicts and themes. I performed similarly in my college English classes even though I always loved writing. In high school I had learned to follow a formulaic essay outline, but I did not know how to interrogate ideas in a text.

Even though I criticized myself at the time for just not trying hard enough, I now know that my emotional and academic struggles are common to FGS.

How This Book Came to Be

What made us take on the exhilarating and difficult effort of co-editing a book on first-generation college students? Our impetus came from two different directions: first, from our personal standpoint, and second, because of a professional need.

We met many years ago at the National Communication Association's annual convention. We both belonged to the Undergraduate College and University Section, which is a smaller unit of the larger association. Several years ago, Teresa posted a call for book chapters on FGS. Through our ensuing conversations, we eventually became friends and learned we were both first-generation college students. That commonality eventually brought us to work together as co-editors.

The book's second motivation came from the frustration experienced by both our colleagues and ourselves as we worked with FGS. The large number of college courses focusing on race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity reflect how these constructs are recognized by academics as important aspects of human identity. Far fewer courses address social class in the United States and elsewhere. Still, even at a time when scholars from different disciplines are giving slightly more attention to class, there is no collective resource for support staff and faculty who work with FGS.

Additionally, we consistently heard from colleagues that the literature on first-generation college students included personal narratives, literature reviews, or out-of-date scholarship. There are also few qualitative and quantitative studies on FGS. Personal narratives are certainly a useful starting point for understanding what specific struggles FGS face, and the authors touch on their personal experiences as first-generation college students throughout this book. However, this book combines narrative essays with updated scholarly investigation of how FGS cope with and experience academic culture. The essays collectively represent a balance of personal narrative, qualitative, and quantitative approaches. Taken together, both personal narratives and scholarly writing give readers a holistic perspective on how they can assist FGS in unique ways that address their particular struggles. We knew there was a great need for a readable and practical book offering a combination of methodologies with recommendations that appeal to staff, faculty, and administrators who work with FGS.

Therefore, this collective volume fills an important gap in first-generation research by simultaneously achieving important goals.

The essays review the existing literature on FGS; outline the barriers to college success faced by FGS; update the existing literature by introducing new and cutting-edge first-generation research; and recommend solutions to those in the trenches, who include support staff who design programs to support FGS and faculty who teach and learn from FGS.

This edited volume is primarily tailored to faculty development centers. The spirit of faculty development manifests itself throughout colleges and universities that create and sustain programs geared toward supporting FGS. There are existing practices and programs that are coordinated through faculty development programs such as teaching and learning workshops, faculty development conferences, new faculty orientation, and new student and transfer student orientations.

There are other successful programs not affiliated with faculty development centers that also promote opportunities for faculty who work directly with FGS. Such programs include first-generation programs, first year programs, nontraditional student programs, summer reading programs, faculty-student mentoring, tutoring programs, and honors programs, to identify a few. The names of the programs vary from college to college, but ultimately they are carefully designed to meet the changing needs of more and more FGS who enter our doors. These formal and sometimes less formal venues provide faculty with the needed resources for FGS success.

We believe that the degree of success that FGS experience in colleges and universities is directly linked to the instructional and evaluative resources available to the teaching faculty through the programs identified above. Above all else, this book is intended to be used in these programs to help create an environment conducive to growth, revitalization and renewal for staff and faculty, and ultimately the academic and professional success of FGS.

Book Overview and Themes

The book is organized into two sections:

Section I, "Introduction and Overview of Book's Objectives," examines class's contextual influence on academic performance and cultural transition, the challenges of teaching first-generation college students, and outlines concrete pedagogical strategies for creating respectful, collaborative, and productive learning environments.

Section II, "Meeting the Challenges of First-Generation Students through Academic Programs," focuses on specific and creative ways

in which universities and colleges can improve institutional, social, and academic support for FGS.

The book's essays collectively address the following topics of concern to administrators, faculty and staff who interact with FGS:

- Balancing home and academic cultures
- Understanding classism in the academy and class segregation on campus
- Effective pedagogy for teaching FGS
- Race, ethnicity, class, and immigration as they impact FGS' campus experiences
- Insight for developing successful first-generation support service programs
- FGS' emotional, academic, and cultural adjustment to campus life
- Balancing work and financial struggles with college studies
- Instructors' classroom challenges of dealing with respect and authority with FGS
- The impact of a FGS' living situation (such as in a campus living-learning center) on academic and cultural transition

This book will ultimately benefit students by helping administrators, faculty and staff better understand how to reach out to FGS. These students bring an important but underrepresented perspective into academia. By recognizing contextual factors such as class on students' academic performance and cultural transition into college, colleges and universities can create campus environments that are appreciative and respectful of everyone. Many FGS already possess survival skills that give them the courage to forge the unfamiliar college path. However, faculty, staff, and administrators can work together to help even more FGS create stories of success.

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♦ CHAPTER TWO ♦

**GUIDING CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN
FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS:
A PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO CLASSISM
IN THE ACADEMY**

Brandi Lawless

Many FGS struggle with transitioning to college from high school. When I went to college, I was nervous and excited about the social, economic, and academic challenges I would face. I did not expect that some people on campus would think I did not belong there. Responding to my first writing assignment, my freshman English composition instructor told me that I lacked the vocabulary necessary for college success. I was confused about how my professor could strongly question my intelligence. After all, my high school assistant principal had written in a recommendation, “I do not see Brandi stopping at less than a Master’s degree.” Why, then, was my success potential being challenged? It took me a long time to understand that the problem stemmed from the differences between where I had come from (a small town in rural Pennsylvania) and where I had gone (a highly populated, high-class institution).

Reflecting on my experience, it becomes painfully obvious that the language I used and the lower-class experiences I brought to college were labeled as inferior to those other students. I felt like I did not belong unless I altered my behavior. Stories like mine are not uncommon. hooks (2000) states, “Throughout my graduate student years, I was told again and again that I lacked the proper decorum of a graduate student, that I did not understand my place. Slowly, I began to understand fully that there was no place in academe for folks from working-class backgrounds who did not wish to leave the past behind” (p. 42).

Though many FGS may not identify as lower or working class, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2005) reports that compared to peers whose parents have college degrees, FGS are more likely to be Black or Hispanic or come from low-income families (p. 7). In fact, more than 50 percent of FGS have families with incomes below the poverty line, and an additional 34 percent can be labeled “low income” (NCES, 2005).

Scholars document class consciousness and classism in higher education. Some argue that the university maintains social class order by marginalizing students from lower- and working-class backgrounds (Engen, 2004; hooks, 2000; Moon, 2001; Wong(Lau), 2004). Both Wong(Lau) and hooks describe their felt need to erase their class origins and other interrelated parts of their identity (such as race, ethnicity, and gender) if they wanted to “belong” in the academy.

Engen (2004) describes how a change in world view often accompanies transition into college and disrupts identity. The values and expectations of a lower- or working-class person’s home life usually differ from those of their middle-class peers and professors. These changes in world view and self-identity can invalidate a person, make him or her rebellious, or motivate change, as in my case. In other words, the college setting motivates some FGS to change class identity. Cabrera and Padilla (2004) examine class consciousness in their case study of two Mexican FGS. They found that these students transitioned into the middle-class college culture to achieve academic success (p. 154). This culture is taken for granted by middle-class families and remains a barrier for lower-class families with little or no education (Cabrera & Padilla, p. 153).

Reconstructing class identity is not easy because the criteria for class identity are usually implicit. A lower- or working-class student may not understand the implicit behavioral expectations of academic culture. This chapter examines why instructors must expose the invisible expectations they have of students and re-evaluate how they perpetuate these normalized expectations in the classroom. I introduce ideas for integrating class into the curriculum in order to recognize social biases and reduce the culture shock that FGS often experience.

Social Class in the Lives of FGS

Class systems have existed for centuries. The word “class” comes from the Roman word *classis*, or a system used to separate people

into groups in order to tax them (Allen, 2004). Karl Marx defines class in terms of social relationships and connection to the economic process, rather than societal rank (Lee & Paek, 2005). Max Weber claimed that people are segregated into class categories based on property, prestige, and power (Fussell, 1983).

The definition of class has continually shifted. Some scholars denote class as connected to capital, or the amount of assets and resources one possesses (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Scholars define socio-economic status to include “social capital” as resources (e.g., the number of parents one has at home, presence of a grandparent in the home). Other class status predictors include residential location, amount of consumption, and even types of recreational activities engaged in (Allen, 2004).

“Class” now has multiple, contested definitions. Stuber (2006) claims that class’ meanings “must be understood as situated constructions that emerge organically, dynamically, and contextually” (p. 291). Subjective interpretations guide our perceptions of class status and thus negate an objective definition of class. For example, two students with similar financial income could have different class identifications, citing family background, occupation, and other cultural differences as reasons. One or both of these students could identify with multiple class categories and thus make class boundaries subjective.

Despite the pervasiveness of class difference and the universality of class experience, scholars frequently ignore class because it connects to other aspects of identity such as race, age, gender, and sexuality. Class is so intersected with other aspects of identity that it becomes hard to isolate or singularly define. Researchers sometimes disagree how social class’ definition and how it affects identity, but they agree that it impacts people’s lives (Allen, 2004; hooks, 2000; Moon, 2001).

Class often impacts classroom success (Lehmann, 2007; Oldfield, 2007; Priebe, Ross, & Low, 2008; Snell, 2008). Walpole (2003) found that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds generally “work more, study less, are less involved, and report lower GPAs” than their middle-class peers (p. 63). Similarly, lower- or working-class students often experience concerns about social mobility (Saldana, 1994; Walpole). FGS often worry about economic capital (i.e., the ability to find and maintain financial aid for tuition, housing, and additional resources) and cultural capital (i.e., parent’s educational and occupational level, knowledge, and skill sets). Consequently, Lehmann