

High-Achieving First-Generation College Students at American University

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## Abstract

First-generation college students typically have lower GPAs, graduate school ambitions, graduation rates, and challenging course-loads compared to their continuing generation peers (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Terenzini, Springer, Yeager, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996).

Researchers postulate that first-generation students' struggle in the college environment stems from a lack of understanding, awareness, and familiarity with the norms and expectations of college that may have otherwise been passed down from college-educated parents and community members (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Yet, just as Conchas (2006) writes of racial minorities in his study of high-achieving urban high school youth, the first-generation student "population reflects not a monolithic entity in which all [students] perform poorly, but a heterogeneous one in which some perform well and others do not" (p. 2). His approach, along with others, seeks to reframe the discourse on underrepresented students by focusing literature on patterns of achievement and not just failure. Examining these levels of success may lend insight into how to better cultivate achievement among groups traditionally underserved and underrepresented in higher education. Despite the theoretical lens and trends from aggregated research, case studies of high-achieving first-generation students exist on college campuses, but few studies have explored first-generation college students who are also high-achievers (Speirs & Rinker, 2006). Through semi-structured qualitative interviews with four first-generation students at American University who achieve at or above the level of their peers, this capstone seeks to discover how students view their identity as both first-generation students and high-achievers as well as the influences on their achievement and experiences in college despite literature that states they may otherwise be at risk.

### High-Achieving First-Generation College Students

“I guess in its own way, there might be negative connotations to [being a first-generation student]. Because it’s like, oh your parents didn’t go to college, which to some people may not be perceived as well, but at the same time, at least I am going to college and I am making that effort. So, I think that’s the good in it. But I do think that a lot of people may not see [first-generation status] in the highest light. Or they have labels that they attach to it.”

“Really they [first-generation students] should know that they are as good as anybody else regardless of their background. Or at least that they are capable of achieving as much if they put in the work.”

“The most interesting for me is actually where I’m coming from and what’s expected. People, a lot of people [where I come from] think graduating. Graduating, when you talk about graduating, their big thing is high school. High school is the top of the top you know...if you graduate high school. You’ve done something in a lot of people’s opinion where I’m from. So, I think now it’s just like...having the aspiration to get a PhD I think is something amazing.”

When we talk about underserved students in higher education, we are tempted to discuss their struggles within the university setting. The very real problems of academic retention and attrition among underrepresented minorities, low-income students, and first-generation college students warrant attention across the literature as well as within the offices of higher education institutions.

However, recent attempts to reframe this discourse on underrepresented students seek to focus on patterns of success and not just failure. First-generation students, or students whose parents do not have a bachelor’s degree, constitute one group of interest in this regard. What are the college experiences of first-generation students who are high achievers? How do their experiences relate or not to the dominant themes in the literature on first-generation student experience? Why do they achieve despite trends that suggest difficulty? Using qualitative interviews with high-achieving first-generation students at a private university, American

University, this paper explores the experiences of first-generation students, whose backgrounds are traditionally and conventionally associated with lower academic attainment.

## Literature Review

### *First-Generation Research*

Much literature on first-generation students has focused on the difficulties first-generation college students face in the higher education environment. For the purposes of this paper, a first-generation college student is defined as a student whose parents or guardians did not receive a bachelor's degree. In addition, while first-generation students can inhabit a range of income levels, first-generation status, while not synonymous with, will be associated with class and socioeconomic status as parental education level is one component of individual's social position and indicator of economic opportunity.

Studies demonstrate that first-generation students are less likely to persist and less likely to graduate on time than their peers from college-educated backgrounds (Choy, 2001; Ishitani, 2006; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Terenzini, et al., 1996; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nunez, 2001). First-generation students are also more likely to be enrolled in remedial courses, take less rigorous courses, and have lower GPAs (grade point averages) than their peers (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009; Strayhorn, 2006; Terenzini, et al., 1996; Warburton, et al., 2001). Studies also report that first-generation students have lower degree aspirations than students whose parents have college degrees (McCarron, 2006; Pascarella, 2004; Pratt, 1989; Terenzini, 1995}. Demographically, first-generation students are more likely to be Hispanic, low-income, older, have dependents, and work while in school (Choy, 2001; Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998; Terenzini, et al., 1996).

*Cultural Capital and Navigation of Higher Education*

Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural capital is most often cited as an explanation for these trends. (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Pascarella, et al., 2004). Schooling and education constitutes a form of social or cultural capital. Educated parents who have previously attained knowledge—through schooling and credentials—can pass along valuable information about higher education to their children (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 210). Students from a first-generation background, researchers postulate, lack access to the kind of capital that students from educated backgrounds possess and may be at a disadvantage by lacking a full understanding of the nature of higher education (Pascarella, et al., 2004).

Furthermore, college can be thought to constitute its own kind of culture, where norms and expectations of behavior govern how success is to be achieved by students. For example, Collier & Morgan (2008) write how there is a certain “college student role” that students must play and master in order to be successful. As stated above, underrepresented students such as first-generation college students may lack access to the knowledge about these cultural norms that can lead to college success because of their unfamiliarity with the college process and landscape. Thus, one explanation for first-generation struggle is difficulty mastering the college student role.

For example, first-generation students may face more difficulties in building meaningful interactions with college faculty than their continuing-generation peers, something considered an important component to college success (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008; Olenchak & Hebert, 2002). First-generation, working-class students viewed faculty as distant and uncaring, and differences in terms of first-generation and continuing generation students' perceptions of faculty expectations

exist (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Longwell-Grice & Longwell-Grice, 2008). In a study by Collier & Morgan (2008), first-generation students desired more clarity on assignments from faculty, paid more attention to expectations concerning mechanics of writing, and felt distant from their professors who used advanced vocabulary.

First-generation college students can also experience “culture shock” in terms of university expectations and academic preparation (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Penrose, 2002; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989). First-generation students may feel under-prepared for college-level work after arriving to the university (Penrose, 2002; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989). This lack of preparation relates to the overall trends of the first-generation experience in terms of student retention discussed above. The notion of college norms and how they affect the first-generation transition has also addressed themes including the separation felt from family and home-life and identity development following personal transformation in college (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Brooks-Terry, 1988; Collier & Morgan, 2008; H. London, 1996; H. B. London, 1989, 1992; Martinez, et al., 2009; Olenchak & Hebert, 2002; Orbe, 2004; Riehl, 1994; Speirs & Rinker, 2006).

Conflict between home life and college life is a dominant theme in the literature (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; H. B. London, 1989, 1992). Researchers can describe the experiences of first-generation college students as individuals living “on the margin of two cultures” (H. B. London, 1992). London (1992) writes how “these students live and share in the life and traditions of two distinct cultures, never quite wanting or willing to break with their past, even if permitted to do so, and never fully accepted, because of prejudice, in the culture in which they seek a place.” Furthermore, for many first-generation students, “going to college magnified something they always knew deep within themselves: they were different than many people in their families and communities” (Bryan & Simmons, 2009).

The experience of going to college and perhaps moving up in social class thus created a new identity that conflicted with the old. New tastes, forms of dress, speaking habits, or other behaviors influenced by the college environment may create distance between a first-generation student and his or her family and community (Bradbury & Mather, 2009; Bryan & Simmons, 2009; H. B. London, 1992; Orbe, 2004). In addition, families who have not had significant or successful college experiences may not understand the new responsibilities that are placed on college students, and this misunderstanding can create tension between children's student and home responsibilities (Bradbury & Mather, 2009). Given the tension that can occur between students and family given a lack of understanding of the college environment, students may not feel comfortable discussing college adjustment issues with their family. However, given their first-generation status—which in certain institutional environments may put students in an underrepresented group—students may also feel uncomfortable discussing problems with other students who they perceive to be of a different social class than them (H. B. London, 1989; Orbe, 2004).

#### *Achievement among underrepresented groups*

However, what information exists concerning those students who achieve at or above the level of the peers despite trend research that suggests otherwise? Researchers have attempted to address this question through documenting the experience of high-achieving students from backgrounds typically associated with lower educational progress.

For example, Conchas (2006) profiled high-achieving low-income African-American, Asian, and Latino students in a California high school in his book *The Color of Success*, where he examined the agency of youth and structural and cultural factors that can account for student success. He writes that “the racial minority student population reflects not a monolithic entity in



which all youth perform poorly, but a heterogeneous one in which some perform well and others do not” (Conchas, 2006). This framework guides this research, which seeks to focus on those students who have been able to meet traditional measures of achievement.

Yet, little research exists that looks at the role of socioeconomically diverse students, as measured by parental education, in higher education. Spiers & Rinker (2006) conducted a qualitative study of four high-ability first-generation, working-class females. Their findings suggest that an emerging professional identity, and independence and strong work ethic were influences on achievement in college (Speirs & Rinker, 2006). However, few other studies have examined first-generation college students who achieve at or above the level of their continuing generation peers. Just as Conchas and others hope to shed light on patterns of high achievement among ethnic minority and low income students as well as on their experiences in the schooling environment as historically marginalized groups, so too does this research seek to examine the underserved population of first-generation students within a higher education context.

### Methodology

This analysis is based on interviews with four first-generation students at American University with a grade point average (GPA) of at least a 3.5 were interviewed. High-achieving was defined as a 3.5 GPA or above because this is the cutoff GPA used for Dean’s List, the University Honors Program, and other marks of achievement. While I acknowledge that achievement can be measured in numerous ways (including non-quantitative measures), GPA as a sampling strategy was used because it could be easily advertised to students. The interview questions attempted to delve more deeply into students’ perceptions of their identity and achievement beyond grades.

American University is a private university in Washington, DC. Much of the research discussed above is focused on either longitudinal, nationally representative data sets or case studies of public universities and community colleges, where many first-generation students attend. Few studies have explored first-generation college student status at private institutions. While using this institution as a case study provides an interesting context for exploring first-generation students, limitations with this study design should be acknowledged. The selectivity of a private university implies a self-selection of the applicants involved, students who are offered admissions are done so because they meet certain requisite achievement requirements, and most students who apply may do so under the assumption they have some chance of consideration. This implies some limitations in the generalizability of the results below; however, the themes open up questions for future research, as will be discussed further.

### Results and Discussion

First-generation students were asked questions on their college-going background, their family background, their first-generation identity, their adjustment and transition to college, and views of achievement. Certain key themes emerged including students' view of themselves as first-generation students even in the presence of achievement levels, the role of parents in the college-going process, race and social class interactions at the university, and socializing and social adjustment of high-achieving students. Since one goal of this study was to examine the experiences of successful first-generation students, these themes demonstrate influences on students' successes as well as suggest ways in which these students' experiences can be enhanced.

#### *First-Generation Identity*

Examining first-generation identity was a key concern for this research. Since first-generation status (as well as lower socioeconomic status more broadly) is typically associated with lower educational attainment and persistence, it was important to explore how students with high GPAs viewed their first-generation identity.

When asked if students identify as first-generation college students, students generally answered with a seemingly tepid yes. While students admitted they identified as first-generation because of the fact their parents did not complete college, some qualified this as a defining marker of them as students. For example, students said:

I mean, if you define it as parents not going to university, college, then yeah [I identify as a first-generation college student]...actually I don't see it as part of my identity. Just when you brought it [the interview] up, talked to me, yeah I do fit the mold. But, it doesn't really change how I think or you know who I am...I never felt labeled it until I got to AU. Then I heard the term thrown around. And I thought oh that's me, I'm a first-generation.

I don't shout it off the rooftops but like if someone asks me [about being first-generation] I do [say I am].

Yeah I think [I identify as a first-generation college student]. I mean I don't think about it too much. But I think that is...the case.

However, other experiences the interviewees discussed revealed identification with first-generation status as defined and characterized in the literature, such as feelings of cultural difference from majority students, difficulties relating to home life after the first year of college, or communication with parents about college life. This demonstrates that first-generation students across achievement levels may share commonalities, which can be important for student service practitioners to acknowledge. First-generation identity as it is described in the literature may co-exist with high levels of achievement; thus, certain aspects of the first-generation experience may comprise defining aspects of an individual, but not necessarily dictate achievement outcomes, such as GPA. For example, students demonstrated a realization of

differences in cultural capital and difficulties adjusting to home environments following college, commonalities with first-generation status as documented in the literature:

I'm kind of proud of the fact that I am [first-generation]. And it hasn't made things very easy for me. Like I didn't have parents going 'oh well I know this alum at Yale so I'll get you an interview.' Like I didn't even really know what that was and like I still sometimes struggle with the whole...financial aid things and loans, the fact that my parents really thought they were going to be able to help me with it and it's very clear right now that I'm going it alone when I get out of here which is kind of a bummer. But I guess if I can take credit for the fact that I had to go through those struggles like other first-generation college students I'm going to.

I feel like when you get to college anyway no matter what we're all kind of drowning or a while because we don't know what we're doing and everything's moving so fast and you're trying to figure out should I get a job? What classes do I have to take? Can I go abroad? Things like that. Financial aid. And so I just think you can identify with each other a little bit more [with first-generation students] because...you have to worry about money too. And things like that. So we're just kind of saying it sucks to have to go through it on your own and not have as much support in the background...I have a good friend, and she's a first-generation. And she definitely struggles. She struggles with it a lot trying to figure out. And I think it's also hard for us to explain to our parents what we're doing. Like I'll try to explain to my mom different classes, and she like really tries to understand what I'm doing but she doesn't—she appreciates it and is amazed by it, but I don't think she can really fathom what we go through in college.

I really, can't interact with that much people [back home] anymore. Things that used to interest me, things I used to be all about are no importance to me anymore you know. But still that is that level of respect that people give me, which I cherish, you know. I think... that a lot of my friends you know... they're either....dead, or in jail, or have kids. So, like I'm doing this for them. Like a lot of them, would like this, would love to have an opportunity like this. But, certain circumstances don't allow them to so. I'm doing it for them. So you know I'm transcending myself going beyond me.

[I identify as first-generation] because my parents didn't go and we were poor. My dad's still poor, but my mom has been getting raises now. But definitely...I grew up with parents, you know, it showed that they just had high school education from I guess the income they had and the standard of living. And the fact that they couldn't help me with the college application process and homework stuff like that.

This identity also comes with pride in first-generation status:

I know one particular student in particular. And it's just I see myself in him. And I'm sure he sees me in him. So we're together, working on this, we're kind of in this for a purpose. I'm not saying others are not, but just for us it's like, we have to do this.

Another example of how the students shared identifiable characteristics with students profiled in the literature concerned parents' difficulty in aiding students in navigating the college application process. One student told how her mother who works at a hair salon would ask her customers if their kids went to college and what advice they could share. Her family eventually hired someone to aid them with the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) process. Another student talked about how while her family supported her, the college application process itself was ultimately self-directed:

There was never any surprise when I started talking about applying to college. I guess you can say that people have always expected a lot from me. So they probably shaped me in the sense that [my family] would compliment me and say 'oh you're doing well, you're a smart girl, you're going to be big,' and stuff like that. So maybe that kind of reinforced the fact that I was going to be going to college. There was nothing direct...they didn't even know anything about the college application process. I was lonely when I did all that.

Still, the role of parents, despite these difficulties, was undeniable.

### *Parents*

When asked why students went to college, one of the most highly rated reasons was because of the support and encouragement of parents. This trend is relevant in light of recent research on first-generation students based on longitudinal analysis of the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey, a national survey given to incoming college freshmen. One of the most significant findings in this study was that for the first time, in the past decade, the percentage of first-generation students citing parents wanting them to go as a very important reason to go to college has surpassed non first-generation students (Saenz, Hurtado, DBarrera, Wolf, & Yeung, 2007). This trend is significant because it questions the notion that parents of first-generation or lower-socioeconomic status students can be a detriment to college access through not only lacking college know-how but discouraging college all-together.

Conceptions of parent involvement may need to be reconsidered to capture the full range of possibilities for students' progress through the pipeline.

One possible explanation for the presence of parental support and involvement may be related to economic concerns. Students frequently cited they wanted to go to college to get a job, and this was reinforced by parents as a primary reason to go to college:

I definitely believe in higher education. Both my parents pushed that. And I know that in order to get good really good job you know you need to go to college and get a good education and have good skills.

I guess they just kind of talked about how they didn't go. Job market was horrible because they didn't get to go and different things like that. And things they missed out on because of [not finishing college].

I mean it seems like [college is] as mandatory as high school these days to me. So. I didn't really consider it an option to not go. Because it's kind of expected I mean to get a decent paying job that isn't minimum wage, at least. I mean now they say you need the Master's you know. But definitely at least go to get the bachelor's. To get a decent job.

Therefore, participants equated the college credential with economic opportunity and potential financial stability. In this way, there was a direct link between succeeding at college and achieving social mobility. In fact, students viewed college as inevitability. For these students, like many other high-achieving students particularly in high-income areas, college was seen as a natural next step. While first-generation students and other underrepresented students in high school as a group have difficulty asserting college-readiness and college-going behaviors, the students profiled demonstrated college-going behaviors similar to upper-class peers. Because of the desire for a "good" job, particularly ones that pay higher or are of higher status than their parents, this inevitability of going to college may not just stem from high-achievement but from recognition of economic competitiveness in light of personal experience with low educational attainment in one's own family.

As the Spiers & Rikler study found, students coming from a first-generation, working-class background cited the independence and work ethic they gained from that background as a major influence in their success of managing time and working independently to excel in college. In these ways, there are aspects of the first-generation and/or class background and identity, such as the potential to transcend parental occupations and education level for social mobility, that may actually be motivating certain students to succeed and progress through the educational pipeline. Coupled with parental encouragement and support, this can be seen as one potential factor in students' academic success.

These issues of class, as well as race, were particularly relevant to participants given the social dynamic of a predominately white, upper middle-class institution. Examining these issues is important in order to consider students' adjustment to college, a key component of college retention.

### *Race and Social Class*

When asked questions about identity and social adjustment, ethnic minority students related their concerns about college not necessarily from the standpoint of first-generation students, but from minority status:

Adjusting...from a very diverse, multicultural junior college and coming to a...pretty segregated school [was a challenge]. And a pretty segregated area of DC. I think that was the biggest thing but I learned to deal with it... I stepped into a Race and Political Theory course, or well, in every class honestly. There's only two students, three students max that come from a diverse background so to say or students that are people of color, and I think just different perspectives. People have different perspectives I think. When someone is given, has lived a privileged life, then they think differently than someone that you know had to do things to survive. And you know have a pretty rough life. And just different outlooks. And you know just different understandings of the world.

When I was in high school, I went to actually the most diverse high school in the country...that's what I was used to. People that looked like me. People that didn't look like me. And that was reflected in my friends. However, when I got into the classroom [at

AU], it was majority white. So that was very different for me. That's when I felt like, ok, I stand out. And so, when I got to college, I was somewhat prepared, but not, all the way. It definitely was not as diverse as my high school, so that just took a little shock. Like ok, so not everybody you see is going to look like you, which is completely fine. But that was naturally different for me to deal with.

Issues of racial and ethnic diversity were particularly relevant to these students. However, it was difficult to separate these issues from class position. In fact, feelings of contrast between students' personal experience and their dominant upper class peers were evident across racial lines and mentioned by all first-generation students in the study. One student who self-identified as Caucasian said:

Well I think economics can play into it a lot. Because a lot of first-generation students, this might be a generalization, but they usually come from a like lower socioeconomic status I guess. And so I like have a really great friend of mine. But his parents are both very intelligent, have great jobs. His mom already started I not even sure what you would call it because my parents wouldn't even know what it is, but they started a CD or something, he has 5,000 dollars like growing and then when he graduates it's just going to be huge and he's going to have it and like he doesn't even know what a loan is. He's never taken, like taken out any debt. And like so I think that's one big difference. Because sometimes we have like this divide...he'll say something [like] well I don't even, I've never even taken out a loan...if I knew I could go home to his house and my parents could afford to like take care of me for a while it wouldn't be like a big deal. So I think that kind of plays into it...

This student also observed:

Like you can kind of tell [the differences between students]...I'm not sure, I think that I talk to professors a lot and ask a lot of questions and like go to the Career Center and go to [Office of] Merit Awards like a lot and some other students won't do it as much because they can call their parents and their parents have connections and they'll try to help them to get a job, whereas I don't have any of those connections. And so I try to do that more, so I guess that's where we'll be different.



In addition, the intersection between race and class also provided contrasts for some minority students to see how their class position differed from their minority peers at American University:

Well, instantly, I remember me joining clubs, such as BSA [Black Student Alliance] and Caribbean Circle, so I could find people that I could identify with I guess physically that looked like me. And you assume if they physically look like you, maybe they would have the same experiences as you. And I realized that's not always the case. You just can't judge people by face value. So, that was, I guess a great learning experience for me not to always assume that just because someone looks like you that they've have had the same experience as you...A lot of, from what I found, a lot of the Caribbean students and African American students here, they went to predominately white schools and private schools—completely different from me! That wasn't my experience at all. Just maybe economically our backgrounds were different. Our high school experiences were completely different. Childhood experiences completely different. Just because of those factors alone.

But my perception of the Black Greek system is they're more focused on entertainment rather than changing things you know. I guess following the principles that they live by. Often people are in those associations are more excited about the step shows et cetera than going out in the community and doing service. And I hate the stereotypes that go along with it all. So if I were to join AKA, people would think I was a snooty girl, sady—sady means bougie...so there's all kinds of judgment I think that comes with that. Like boxes...And most of my friends haven't been African American since coming to AU. Not by choice.

These feelings of class differences among the first-generation students corresponded to their social adjustment and socializing patterns, which related to their financial situation.

Examining how students view their peers and experiences at AU in terms of race and class is relevant to their achievement. For example, students note how students from upper class backgrounds seem to have higher expectations or preparation put in to them:

Yeah, I think it is very different...because I do interact with students who do [say]...my mother's a psychiatrist, or my dad's a lawyer. And then it does you know, play a factor because it just, I see like certain privileges you know or preparation that was put, like this was like a track for them. You know they were expected to come to school where I wasn't so. Any of the preparation that went into it. So it is a little different.

I'll take, another friend of mine. Very different conversation...I hope I'm not being offensive in any way—but yeah, one of my friends, both of her parents went to college, they're doing well, she's in a two family household. She's White American. So, she, she actually just got accepted to the University of Chicago. And I'm so excited for her. For her Master's Program. And like talking to her, it's just like, she always knew she was going to get her Master's. She has plans to go to Harvard. And I didn't really start thinking like that probably until this year. You know like 'I can do that.' So just seeing from the background she came from, having parents that actually went to college, she was, it was always ingrained in her system, you know, get your masters, of course do that! Go get your PhD. Of course, you know! Where as for me, you know, wow getting a bachelor's, that's doing something you know. But now I'm like, I'm thinking even ahead of that.

These differences are significant as a possible for explanation for the barriers to higher degree aspirations. As discussed above, first-generation students tend to have lower degree aspirations beyond the bachelor's compared to their continuing generation peers. While students in this study indicated a desire to attend graduate or professional school, the perception that underrepresented students have in regards to the unlikelihood or peculiarity of their higher education may be one obstacle in social perception that first-generation students face. While these first-generation students achieve and have ambitions, they still compare themselves to continuing generation peers and believe there to be differences in preparation and social expectations.

In addition, since retention is a key concern of higher education professionals, these considerations of race and class are important when examining achievement levels of first-generation students. As social integration is an important component of student retention, ensuring that students feel socially integrated and supported, even with academic potential and ability, is important for ensuring college persistence and degree attainment particularly among diverse groups.

### *Socializing and Social Adjustment*

While students acknowledged that their upper class peers were “expected” to go to college and beyond, as mentioned above, they also felt their own inevitability in their college trajectory despite this mismatch in expectations. Participants had taken steps to prepare for their college experience by enrolling in Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or other college preparatory curriculum. While students acknowledged some difficulty in transitioning to college academically, the social adjustment of high-achieving, first-generation students was noteworthy:

That’s a tricky question [whether or not I felt socially prepared for college]. Yes and no. Because college is more than just academic. So. I think academically I was fine, but maybe in other aspects like socially it took me a while to find my group. But I did find it. But it did take me a while to just kind of figure out you know where do I belong? Where’s my niche?

[Coming to college] was like being hit in the face...AU wasn’t what I—I was really excited...about meeting like intellectuals and having great intellectual conversations all the time about important issues, then I get to my dorm and people are like trashed and everybody’s just wild and having sex randomly. And not that interesting in general on an intellectual level...I was just really uninterested in maybe the people. Maybe I’m just too judgmental sometimes. But I just kind of felt like maybe there was a wall sometimes between me and certain people. Like we really wouldn’t go far in the conversation.

A consistent theme across interviews were students’ reluctance to drink, go out, or “party.” In addition, this aversion to partying like most of their peers was connected to social class and financial status:

I think you can take an example of Spring Break you know. People they plan out their spring break, oh I’m going to Caribbean everything. I can’t afford that. I have to stay here and work. So I think things like that, things are of more importance, people able to really go out you know on weekends and you know spend some money and you know have a good time or have fun you know. But for me, I define fun differently. So, and then just, just like I said other things that are, that are prioritized for me are just a little bit different I think because of my background.

I would be asked to do things that would require a lot of money. And then when I said that I couldn’t do those things, people would bitch and moan...people would feel like why are you making a big deal out of this? You know. Basically it came out with money

was a topic of interest. And I had to explain that I couldn't afford that. That's a significant amount of money for me.

I mean I don't know if this has anything to do with being first-generation college student, but I didn't like to party. And so I felt like out of place for a while until I found students that also didn't like to party.

These social difficulties indicate that while high-achieving first-generation students may contradict trends that suggest academic struggle in transitioning, they may still face social difficulties that have implications for their retention. The findings on drinking correspond to studies that have found that first-generation students are less likely to engage in adverse study behaviors, such as drinking, than non first-generation students, and they are less likely to join a social fraternity or sorority (Powell, Williams, & Wechsler, 2004). Thus, the construction of college student activities and socializing patterns, such as binge drinking, may need to be evaluated to see if they contain certain class biases and how these norms of student behavior may pose difficulty for social transition for students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds at universities. Because certain normative college social activities may impose a monetary cost, these activities may leave out those students without the financial means to partake. In addition, because students admitted that they considered themselves high-achieving students, partying and drinking behaviors may be seen as detrimental to college success, particularly for students who are the first in their family to graduate college (Powell, et al., 2004):

[I didn't want to drink because of] family background and different things. I was afraid of alcohol for a while and just didn't want to be a part of that. And I also just didn't want to drink, I always say I've been an old lady since I was like 13. I like to go bed early, I love mornings. Like I didn't want to stay up late as much as my friends did all the time. Also I worried about school a lot. So like they'd go out, I'd feel like I had to study. Or I was a teaching assistant my sophomore year, so I'd feel like I had to correct papers or something.

It's kind of funny, but [my parents told me] schools now boys later... Which basically I guess means you know you'll have time to have a social life and play and have fun you

know for the rest of your life, you know for the rest of your life you'll have that time to do that, you should focus on school now, get that finished with so you can go play and have fun and have an exciting productive life that's fulfilling.

These passages not only suggest that students did not want to engage in certain activities especially if they came in the way of school, but also reinforce the importance of higher education instilled in them during prior schooling ages.

### Conclusion

This paper reflects a preliminary documentation of the experiences of high-achieving first-generation college students at a selective private university. I chose to start with students who were high-achieving in order to begin to look at instances of success among a group thought to struggle academically. While this study does not fully document the causes for success among this group, it begins to highlight factors for progress such as parental encouragement and advanced course taking.

Students in this study shared some aspects of identity with other first-generation students profiled in the literature, but also possessed high motivation to succeed in their studies. This success was heavily influenced by parents despite notions that less-educated parents will discourage education for their children. Issues of racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic "diversity" resonated with participants as this affected their social experience at the university. These social experience, such as the pressures to drink and party at college, shaped their first-year experiences in ways that call for further investigation.

In addition, further research could compare experiences with high-achieving students from first and non-first generation backgrounds to see how their responses differ. These comparative studies of achievement across as well as within groups could also be helpful, such

as comparing at-risk students to high-achieving students within various identity groups. For example, while the participants described their participation in advanced college preparatory coursework, one participant was an anomaly among those interviewed:

To understand, you got to know the background of my schooling...I was tracked in a sense...there were programs set in place...between the local community college and the high school for high school students to take courses, prep courses at the college, but my high school counselor declined that. She said that, that I wasn't ready for it and it would be too much for me...but she was quick to assign me, give me approval to work as a student. So, yeah that's when I first thought about school. But then, like my path was diverted by this counselor to think about trade school instead. But then I thought about college when I spoke with my aunt who I'm now living with...I come from Southern California. And the Los Angeles area. And there's a lot of you know Mexican Americans and a lot of Asian immigrants. And you know certain sects of the population are tracked to work and others to excel in higher education. So. The focus wasn't really on the individual.

This is more consistent with the common views of minority and lower SES students that Conchas and others acknowledge; yet, this student qualified for the high-achieving study. This indicates that more in-depth research is needed to examine college achievement among students from under-resourced areas in order to assess what can be learned for college access and retention practitioners seeking to transition students from high school to college. This research hopes to open up the question on examining why certain students in environments such as the one discussed above, which predict a lower chance of college-going, produce not only college attendants but highly successful college students, and if anything can be learned from these experiences that can better serve other students.

For example, social adjustment, particularly those with racial and class implications, was an important factor in the college experiences of participants in this study. Although able to maintain a high GPA, adequate social integration should be viewed as an essential component to a college experience as it can contribute to college attrition and affinity issues. This mindset involves viewing the entire student within the higher education context and taking into account

social transition, even when factors such as parental encouragement and AP courses indicate strong potential. Further research could investigate the social and emotional aspects of this transition given the salience of these experiences to students in their interviews to examine what implications could potentially exist for academic engagement and retention. While these students are on-track to graduate, their experiences indicate that social adjustment is a challenge even in the presence of academic achievement.

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## Appendix

### Interview Protocol

#### Demographics

- What is your age?
- What is your year in college?
- What is your cumulative GPA?
- What is your major?
- What is your ethnic background?

#### College-going background

- Why did you decide to go to college? What influenced you to go to college?
- What made you decide to come to this college? What other colleges did you consider?
- When did you first start to think about college?
- How do you feel like your schooling experience influenced your achievement?
- Were you a part of any special programs in high school—such as after-school programs, summer bridge programs, AP classes, or gifted and talented programs—that aided you in going to college?
  - If YES:
    - How do you think that affected your decision to apply to college?
    - How do you think it affected your experience in college?
  - If NO: why not?

#### Parental/Family background

- Which members of your family raised you and were primarily responsible for you?
  - What was their highest level of education?
- What role if any did they/your parents play in your decision to go to college?
- Do you have any siblings? Did they go to college? Did you ever have any discussions with them about their college experience?
- Were there any other individuals significant to your academics? Who were they? Why were they?
- What else influenced you to go to college?
  - *Follow up questions?*

#### First-Generation identity

- Do you identify as a first-generation student?
- Was there an instance when you realized you may have been identified as a first-generation student?
  - How did you react?
  - What do you make of this?
- Describe a recent conversation you have had with a first-generation student?
  - For example, about classes or an experience from childhood.
- Describe a recent conversation you have had with a non-first-generation student?
  - For example, about classes or an experience from childhood.

- Do you know of other first-generation students on campus? How did you meet them? How do you know them? How close are you with them?
- Do you know of students who are not first-generation students on campus? How do you know them? How close are you with them?
- Do you feel like your college experience is typical or different at AU because of your background? Why or why not?

#### Adjustment

- Did you feel prepared academically for college? Why or why not?
- Did you feel prepared socially for college? Why or why not?
- Are there any difficulties you face in college? Is there a specific experience where you realized these difficulties?
- What types of support structures have you observed at AU?
  - What support structures have you used?
  - What do you think should be included that are not currently offered?
- What did you think college would be like before you came to AU?
  - Was college what you expected it to be? Why or why not?

#### Achievement

- Describe what a high achieving student is.
  - What do they do in class? How do they study? What types of classes do they take? What do they do outside of class?
- Do you consider yourself a high achieving student? Why or why not?
  - Do you associate with other high-achieving students?
  - What do you think accounts for your achievement?
- Are you in the Honors Program?
  - If YES:
    - How do you think it affects your achievement?
    - Do you socialize with other students in the Honors Program?
      - Are you aware if any of them are first-generation
        - If yes: does this in any way affect your interaction with them?
  - If NOT:
    - Have you ever thought about joining the program? Why/why not?
- What do you find interesting about your academic pursuits? What do you really enjoy?
  - What is something that you dread? What is something that just doesn't interest you?
- Looking back at your experiences so far, what advice would you give to incoming first-year students who are first-generation students?
- *Relationship with faculty/staff*
  - Would you say you have a mentor while in college? Is this person in your field of study?
  - How did this relationship develop/come to be?
  - Describe your relationship with this faculty mentor?
    - How often do you meet? Where?
    - What do your conversations look like? What do you talk about? Where do you go? How do you sit/stand/walk in relation to each other?

- At this point, what are your aspirations after AU?
- Are you interested in attending graduate or professional school? Why/why not?
  - What field of study?
  - How did you come to that decision?
  - Have you found the program you're applying to?
  - Are you working with anyone at AU or elsewhere on the application/search process?  
What types of concerns or questions do you have about the process?
- What activities are you involved with outside of classes? Sports, hobbies, extra-curricular, jobs, or any other activities you would like to share.
  - What kinds of activities were you involved with in high school?