Why Institutional Narratives About First-Gen Students Matter

> Consider whether your college is putting too heavy a burden on first-generation students with its expectations, write Rashné Jehangir and Tai Do.

By Rashné Jehangir, Tai Do
// August 30, 2022

Editor's Note: This piece is a conversation between Rashné Jehangir, associate professor of higher education and founding director of the First Gen Institute (https://www.cehd.umn.edu/olpd/research-and-engagement/firstgen/) at the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota, and Tai Do, a sixth-year doctoral student of educational psychology and a graduate research assistant with the institute. Their thoughts are in reaction to findings from the recent Student Voice survey of 1,073 first-generation undergraduate students (https://reports.collegepulse.com/first-gen-student-success), conducted by Inside Higher Ed *and College Pulse with support from Kaplan.*

For those of us whose work has been centered around students who are first in their family to go to college, this survey's data reaffirm the complexity, nuances and assets of this new majority. As scholar-practitioners, we read the survey not only from the perspective of student voices but also how these voices hold a mirror to higher education as a whole and particular to different campuses. How much of our interpretation of first-gen experiences is grounded in institutional expectations versus the reality of students' lives?

Jehangir: I came to American higher education as an international student, a sojourner, a South Asian immigrant and much later an American citizen. I began my career with first-gen college students in TRIO Student Support Services and McNair Scholars programs. It was a deep lesson in recognizing how much of higher education is rooted in a meritocracy of rules, norms and expectations—both spoken and unspoken—that privilege some and punish others. It was during those summers with the first-gen scholars that I wanted to go back to earn a Ph.D. and continue to engage in equity research.

In my current work, I am constantly reminded of how the term "first-gen" can signal different things to different audiences, and, unlike other social identities, it comes into play only in relation to becoming part of higher education.

Do: I have and still am navigating the American education system as a first-gen college student, 1.5-generation immigrant and Southeast Asian student from a low-income background. It was tough figuring out how to be a student while also being an interpreter, a caregiver, the eldest son and the first to navigate the complex educational paths ahead of me. It was also so motivating to know that

every success I accomplished (e.g., getting into college) meant that I also brought my family with me, that I was repaying their sacrifices by becoming someone notable.

As a current Ph.D. student in educational psychology, I am present for the students who are the first to carry their cultural capital and knowledge into higher education while juggling family and cultural obligations. I understand intimately what it means to navigate a campus environment in which the culture is mismatched with one's own knowledge and capital.

Data on First-Gen Students

Jehangir: I appreciated that the survey takes data from racially diverse institutions and in doing so raises questions about the overlap of systems (racism, classism) that constrain first-gen students. As we think about what our first-gen students need and bring to campus, does our institutional data tell a full story?

To what extent do our own programs and campuses intersect data on first-gen students with other social identities like race and/or social class? In Minnesota, we have a rich immigrant and refugee population. So many of our first-gen students have experiences rooted in Eritrean, Somali, Hmong and Vietnamese communities, to name just a few.

A significant number of first-gen students at four-year institutions may also be transfer students or commuters. These specificities speak to the need to recognize that first-gen is not a monolith and to use data to paint a more nuanced picture of first-gen students on our particular campus locations and geography. In turn, we can use that data to better prepare faculty and staff to be attuned to the particular needs of first-gen students. Asking questions that are rooted in privilege—such as, "Did you have a fun spring break?"—may ring hollow to many first-gen students who might use this time to work more hours.

Do: I attended a highly resourced high school. Spring break and vacation at the time was a nice reprieve from simultaneously juggling academics with family and religious obligations. Financially, spring break meant that I could save money by not having to buy school lunches. School lunch was both an economic cost and a social cost, as it signaled whether I belonged. Financial anxiety was always at the forefront of my mind, but so was honoring my parents' sacrifices.

For many of my first-generation friends, it was important to graduate as soon as possible. Many of my close friends graduated from college within four, or three, years. In the Student Voice survey, the majority of students (21 percent) indicated graduating as most important to their definition of success, rather than graduating on time (5 percent).

The first-gen experience is nuanced and tugs at multiple intersecting social identities. . First-gen

students often focus on the proximal things (including getting good grades) in front of them first before considering the things that come next. How can we be the institutional agents (e.g., faculty, administrators and advisers) who build systems of support and belonging that responds to what students are saying they need and not what the institution is expecting them to need? How can we support students on their timelines addressing their goals and aspirations? To see that as confidence and self-awareness rather than a lack of understanding or the lack of motivation to broaden one's experiences?

Institutional Narratives

Jehangir: Another compelling Student Voice data point is the percentage of students who tend to reveal their first-gen status (6 percent) or to withhold that information (25 percent) to professors and peers. Unlike 20 years ago, today we have a national first-gen week, first-gen clubs and centers at many campuses. The relative invisibility of first-gen students speaks to the fact that their decision to share their first-gen identity is not just about the individual students' choices but also the ecology and climate of their campus and the power of the institutional narrative of first-gen students.

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In my research, first-gen students consider who is worthy of their vulnerability and how revealing their first-gen status may drown them in stereotypes about their perceived intellectual proficiency and skill sets. So, what is the institutional story of first-gen students? Is it deficit- or asset-based? Is it rooted in a resiliency paradigm that requires students to feel like superheroes? That can also be a heavy burden to carry.

How do we create environments and situate the first-gen story on our campus to allow for visibility and intersection of identity/identities? Having faculty and staff as visible models is one key metric that normalizes and reinforces the social and cultural capital of first-gen students. Another is to create spaces and scaffolded curricula where students name their assets.

As a participant in a recent research interview shared with me, "We're unique in our adaptability. And I think that's something that I admire, and I'm always very happy to see other first-gen college students … We're super adaptable. We've had to really adapt to a bunch of different rapidly changing situations."

Do: Yes! Institutional agents, such as staff and faculty members, who reveal their first-gen status

can facilitate a space in which a student feels a bit more at ease. That there is someone in higher education who either understands or has the vested interest in understanding them, and who they can likely trust to not tokenize them.

The majority of reasons students applied to their current college, according to the survey, is contingent on family and background, such as: affordable tuition, generous financial aid packages, being close to home to visit family and being a commuter. For first-gen students, decisions and opportunities to attend and engage in college are never without the influence of family. This may be misperceived as risk-averse, but institutions, like with the amazing Grissom Scholars program at Centre College (https://www.centre.edu/grissom-scholars/) , demonstrate that proactively involving family members in the process help the first-gen student bridge their academic spaces with their family spaces.

Feelings of Belonging

Jehangir: Eight in 10 students surveyed feel like they belong on campus, but one-third only have a sense of belonging in certain places. This speaks to the importance of recognizing what belonging might mean to students, and particularly students with intersecting social identities (e.g., first-gen, race/ethnicity, immigrant status and class).

Do: In what spaces do students attribute their sense of belonging to? Is it the TRIO programs? Is it the campus cultural centers? When students reflect on their educational journey, do they see an affiliation with the institution they are enrolled at, or do they see themselves as an integral member of different spaces and organizations within that institution?

Although the pandemic has led to significant changes to how students navigate connections, the precursors to students' sense of belonging, and particularly the belonging of first-gen students with intersecting social identities, is that their basic needs are met.

With the rising cost of college and rent, it is not financially feasible to expect students to accept volunteer roles, unpaid internships or pay for transportation to and from their community engagement activities. If institutions and institutional agents are to help students succeed and feel a sense of belonging, they must both invest in organizations and people that support students in feeling valued and appreciated. They must structure and restructure their initiatives so that students can afford to engage and be involved.

Jehangir: As we launch into yet another fall semester, we know we don't have all the answers yet but underscore the importance of asking the right questions.