

## **Social Capital and First-Generation Students: A Sociological Perspective**

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For years, public and private entities have devoted countless efforts aimed at addressing the various problems students from different backgrounds face in school. First-generation college students (FGs) have been a target of such efforts in recent years as echoed by Merullo (2002):

People from all walks of life fail and succeed, act well and act badly, for reasons that no amount of scientific study can ever fully comprehend. But, for those of us, teachers and administrators, who deal with first-generation college students, perhaps it is useful simply to try to imagine the complexity of their predicament, the uniqueness of it. (p. 3)

Much of the predicament facing FGs can be understood not only in terms of economic capital (money, resources, tangible opportunities, etc.) and cultural capital (knowledge and knowhow about college and college admissions, the value that the local community places on postsecondary education, etc.), but also in terms of social capital. The latter is distinct from the other two forms of capital. It is an accumulation of social skills and social relationships that can encourage a student to pursue college studies, make the most of the opportunities presented to him/her in college, persist all the way to a degree, and reap a host of post-graduation benefits. The social capital model – in addition to mere economic and cultural models – can shed light on the sorts of outreach and intervention that might successfully help undo some of the disadvantages faced by FGs.

One may wonder how important it really is to do research on FGs. Turning to the longitudinal Postsecondary Education Transcript Study (PETS) led by Chen and Carroll in 2005, we find suggestions as to the importance of studying FGs. The PETS looked at 1992 12<sup>th</sup> graders, including those who had enrolled in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000. Their findings were interesting, to say the least.

High school seniors whose parents did not attend college were less likely than other students to attend college within eight years of graduation: they made up 28% of the 1992 high school graduating class, yet only 22% of those who ultimately went on to college. During the same period of time, FGs graduated from college at a 24% rate, compared to 68% for students for whom at least one parent had a bachelor's or higher degree. The persistence rate – the percentage of students who either graduated or stayed enrolled – for FGs during the same timeframe was 57% whereas their counterparts' was 80%.

The PETS data show that FGs are lagging behind their counterparts when it comes to enrolling in, persisting in, and graduating from college. Citing a 2003 study by Ishitani, Chen and Carroll (2005) point out that there is some association between that gap and “some family and background characteristics” (p. 1). In what follows, there is first an overview of social capital theory as it relates to education, then challenges for FGs are explored, and finally, the implications for FGs challenges are considered before suggestions are made for fostering more success among FGs.

Since certain demographic traits are consistently associated with the challenges faced by FGs, we may gain insight into the phenomenon by turning to the discipline of sociology. Sociology is “the systematic and scientific study of human social behavior” (Lindsey & Beach, 2000). Since FGs are integral members of society, any attempt to address their challenges would require a good understanding of their lives. Hence, sociological perspectives could be useful in helping resolve the challenges faced by FGs. The rest of this paper will focus on studies related to the topics of social capital and first-generation students, which include empirical research activities, in an effort to: (a) better understand the challenges faced by FGs, (b) consider their repercussions, before (c) making some propositions as to how to go about closing the gap between FGs and their counterparts.

## **Social Capital Theory**

Given social capital's importance to FG students attending college, it is important to understand exactly how the theory evolved and its main facets and contributors. Originally evolving from an economics, social science, and political background, social capital theory is a relatively new approach for considering social advantage. Though its definition is still somewhat ambiguous, social capital theory finds regular use today in areas such as public policy, the social sciences, and the mass media (Field, 2003). Kawachi offers a useful definition of social capital, indicating that it "refers to those features of social relationships... which act as resources for individuals and facilitate collective action for mutual benefit" (2000, p. 1). John Field (2003) captures social capital theory more succinctly: "Its central thesis can be summed up in two words: relationships matter" (p. 1).

The theorists considered most responsible for social capital theory's initial development have varied in their definition, perspectives, and application. Three theorists are viewed as the "fathers," or founders of social capital theory: Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Robert Putnam.

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, first coined the term "social capital," proposing that different types of capital, including economic, cultural, and social capital, define societal roles and relationships (Siisiainen, 2000). He saw all three types of capital as means to accumulate resources in order to get ahead in the world and proposed that in order to achieve this, social capital is transferred from one generation to the next (Castiglione, Van Deth & Wolleb, 2008). Bourdieu (1977) specifically defined social capital as "the sum of resources... that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of... a network of more or less institutionalized relationships" (p. 503).

James Coleman, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, attempted to fuse sociology and economics and was the first person to utilize empirical and operational methods for studying social capital (National Statistics and Reporting Division, 2001). He defined a broad conception of social capital as such:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within that structure. (1988, p. 96)

Robert Putnam, coming from a political science background, popularized social capital theory (Field, 2003). His general definition of social capital is the "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (2004, p. 1). As stated concisely by Putnam, "the core idea here is very simple: Social networks have value" (2004, p. 2). His research took the idea of social capital from a political science background and exposed the general populace to it, extending its reach and use into the modern political, policy and social landscape.

## **Challenges for First-Generation Students**

The amassing of social capital begins at birth and is derived from sources such as parents, friendship networks, and early schooling. This early social capital can then be utilized in the college years as a resource to obtain a higher quality college education and postsecondary experience. Capital accumulated in college can further translate into additional social capital post-graduation. Forms of capital obtained through education can then be rolled back into economic capital through the ability to find a good job and earn a good salary, as well as further social capital through the networks assumed during school and as a result of post-graduate professional ties. In other words, "education systems can lay the foundations for increased social capital" (Race, 2001, p. 2).

The definition of first generation students varies to some extent depending on the source. Some consider FGs to be students whose parents have never been enrolled in college, meaning their highest educational attainment was a high school degree or the equivalent, or less (USDOE, National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey – NPSAS, 2004). Others define FGs as students for whom neither parent graduated from college with a baccalaureate degree, but may have some

postsecondary experience (Thomas, Farrow, & Martinez, 1998). There is also a newer trend which considers whether siblings of the FG students may have attended college before them.

Parental education is a key element to both the amount and quality of social capital available to students. As such, there are obvious impacts for FGs since their parents have not obtained a college education. FGs often begin college with lower levels of cultural and social capital than students whose parents attended college (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Put simply, the higher the level of education of the parent(s), the more opportunities that offers to the child.

Various forms of capital (economic, cultural, and social) that impact FGs' postsecondary education are interrelated, and create a web of general capital that is provided to a child by their family through various means. Social capital factors specifically include parental involvement with teachers, other school officials, and other parents, as well as relationships and interactions with other external educational individuals and groups such as tutors, gifted programs, financial aid officers, and school counselors. Additionally, cultural and economic capital such as parents' ability to assist with homework, financial ability, and knowledge to take advantage of resources such as tutors or private schools, and a higher understanding and acceptance of the importance of education for future success interplay with social capital as they are developed and obtained through relationships such as those described earlier.

The parents of FGs can offer little support and occasionally even actively oppose their children's further education (Pardron, 1992), and FGs often "have little family support or guidance" (Sickles, 2004, p.1). Parents of FGs are less likely to attend information sessions on college, seek out financial aid information, go on college visits, or help their child complete the college enrollment process (Engle, 2007). Additionally, due to their own lack of education, FGs' parents may not have a solid understanding of the value and importance of a college education and therefore, may not encourage their children to attend (Engle). Studies also show that FGs see going to college as a

disjunction, as opposed to a continuation of academic and social experiences. Engle supports that argument, indicating that "first-generation students often experience discontinuities between the culture (i.e. norms, values, expectations) of their families and communities and the culture that exists on college campuses, which they often describe as "worlds apart" (p. 11).

First-generation students are more likely to face challenges in college which make it difficult to obtain the social capital granted by higher education, and which their peers with college-educated parents often do not face. Many challenges face FGs even when they are able to overcome these early barriers to the pursuit of higher education, including level of school issues, concerns over the cost of college, the integration to college culture, work and family demands, and academic preparation issues.

The opportunities provided by higher education for FGs are developed during college through interactions between students and professors, social peer networking, skill sets acquired through class work and research opportunities, and the chance to learn "real-life" coping and interactive skills. What is learned in college courses and how it is learned can also have a notable effect on students' ability to interact socially after graduation, and proposes that "pedagogy that encourages active teamwork seems likely to be more effective in inculcating social skills than pedagogy that promotes purely individual achievement" (Putnam, 2004, p. 6).

FGs find themselves at a distinct disadvantage compared to students with college-educated parents when it comes to social capital attained through higher education relationships. FGs are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities and campus life even though research shows that they receive a greater social capital benefit from such activities, and they tend to spend little time on campus outside of class (Engle, 2007). Because of these factors, FGs therefore have less opportunity for building relationships with professors and other students, which can allow for additional out-of-class learning, research, and

mentoring than they may not have otherwise received (Walpole, 2003).

The type of school attended can impact the amount of social capital granted from higher education. FGs are more likely to attend public colleges than private schools (HERI, 2007) and are more likely to attend a 2-year than a 4-year institution (Minnesota Office of Higher Ed, 2006). Concern about the cost of college can present more of an obstacle to FGs, and they are more likely to consider financial factors when choosing a college and are twice as likely to report major concern about financing college (HERI). Additionally, FGs sometimes select 2-year colleges because of family and occupational situations. First-generation students are more likely to be married and more likely to have children (Minnesota Office of Higher Ed), and both of these factors impact the amount of effort and time FGs are able to dedicate to their college education. As such, the potential imbalance of work and family demands can lead to a higher proportion of FGs selecting 2-year schools for the flexibility needed to meet their responsibilities. These same factors, home and family situations and finances, can also effect time to degree attainment, which has been shown to have a negative effect on FGs' persistence and time to graduation.

Given that attending a 2-year school instead of a 4-year school, and a public institution over a private have implications for the amount of social capital available, both financial concerns and family and occupational situations are important factors when considering potential social capital available to FGs. Opportunities for social networking through clubs, organizations, interactions with professors and peers with similarly limited time and dedication are more limited in a 2-year setting in particular, reducing the social capital available for FGs who attend that type of institution. This is a crucial point since FGs are more likely to obtain a bachelor's degree if they start at a 4-year college (Bui, 2002), allowing them a greater opportunity for further education and occupations that will continue the accumulation of social capital.

Partly as a result of this lack of social capital building potential through relationships developed in college, FGs are also less likely to continue on to

graduate school (NCES, 1998). According to a 1994 study by Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin, FGs were less likely to enroll in graduate school than their peers with college-educated parents, with only 23% of FGs doing so compared to 30% of their peers (as cited in Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004, p. 13).

Summarily, Pascarella et al. state that "access to higher education must be understood to mean not only admission to some postsecondary institution, but also access to the full range of college experiences and to the personal, social, and economic benefits to which those experiences and degree completion lead" (2004, p. 281). The capital that FGs can achieve through college can then be applied post-graduation to further the accrual of social capital in their adult lives in areas including occupation, further education, social networking and personal benefits. It is apparent that skills, achievements and values obtained through the pursuit of higher education can help FGs develop life-affecting means of increasing social, as well as other kinds of capital, and that the factors impacting their potential to succeed at that endeavor place them at a distinct disadvantage when compared to students whose parents have a college education.

### **Implications and Interventions**

Achieving economic success and social mobility in American society is thought to be a possible outcome of a college education as higher educational attainment generally translates to higher incomes and lower unemployment rates (Engle, 2001). There is a correlation between the number of college-educated citizens and the federal and state governments' tax revenues, as the college educated population generally earns more than people without a college education (Ishitani, 2006). Increases in the number of educated people means a better citizenry, fewer social problems, fewer tax dollars spent on social programs such as crime prevention, jails, health care, and more spending on education. Thus, it is safe to say that FGs are adding to the already heavy burden of other taxpayers, since the above data suggest they are most likely to be in the lower income or higher unemployment categories.

Thus, governments and society at large do not benefit from FGs' predicament. Conscious of the negative consequences of not addressing FGs' challenges – which go beyond less government tax income to include more spending on some social programs – both public and private entities have initiated a number of interventions. Current interventions range from individual institutions, mostly private, designing their own approaches, to private foundations such as the Wal-Mart Foundation, to federal outreach efforts such as the TRIO programs.

For private institutions, “accreditation partly depends on their graduation and job-placement rates” (Person as cited in Glenn, 2004, p. 2). Their interventions mainly consist of monitoring student progress and addressing any issues that may negatively impact persistence and ultimately graduation. Such a system would undoubtedly help resolve some of the problems faced by FGs. The Wal-Mart Foundation aims to change the fact that there is more consensus on FGs' challenges than there is on the solutions (Lipka, 2010). The foundation tries to achieve its objective by making grants to small private colleges as well as minority-serving institutions. While small private college's grants are focused on improving FGs' retention, grants made to minority-serving institutions are aimed at improving FGs' academics. Unlike the first two approaches, which target FGs already enrolled in college, TRIO programs are pre-college federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Talent Search and Upward Bound are components of the TRIO programs that are specifically focused on increasing college awareness and preparation among middle- and high-school students.

Though it is not entirely clear how many FGs are assisted by the various intervention approaches, there were 2,700 TRIO programs serving about one million low-income and first-generation students on an annual basis (Engle, 2007). There were about 14,781,000 high school students in the U.S. in 2000 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). That equates to about 4,138,680 FGs, based on the 28% figure from the

PETS. Those data clearly show that more effort is required in order for FGs to overcome their challenges.

There is, however, evidence that at least some of the existing outreach efforts are making a difference. As Engle (2007) points out, “evaluation data has shown that students who participate in the Upward Bound and Talent Search programs go to college at much higher rates than other low-income and first-generation students, nearly 75 percent compared to about 40 percent respectively” (p. 14). For such students, higher graduation rates could also be the result of interventions such as “one-stop shopping,” “predictable and streamlined curricula,” and “low counselor-student ratios” (Glenn, 2004, p. 2). One-stop shopping is intended to reduce the number of often frustrating and confusing trips made by students to several different offices in order to enroll, register, and apply for financial aid. Facing family and job demands, FGs would be encouraged if colleges' course offerings were more predictable and reliable. A low counselor-student ratio would decrease instances where FGs would register for inappropriate classes or miss important requirements, and only find out when it is too late to make any changes. Those are just a few organizational changes that seem to suggest that FGs' challenges would be mitigated if local and state governments worked with lawmakers to expand their implementation.

By some estimates, FGs represent about one third of all college students (Lipka, 2010). Bui (2002) recommends that there be campus support services specifically aimed at dealing with the unique circumstances of FGs. One thing seems to be consistent among the various studies used; most FGs come from low socioeconomic families. To that end, and in light of Title IX and similar policies, the following questions should be considered for further inquiry: What role can policymakers play in having K-12 and institutions of higher education better help FGs achieve more success in college and beyond? How can they best help FGs and their families increase the social capital necessary for not only improving their college enrollment, but also improving their college persistence and graduation rates? What return

would states and society get if they invested more in FGs by subsidizing their higher education and requiring them to (a) go into high need fields such as K-12 education or nursing and (b) working in underserved areas for a given amount of time after they graduate?

Adding reasonable policies to existing outreach efforts may help increase FGs' bridging social capital, which in turn may help increase their college enrollment, persistence, and graduation rates. Using some incentives to make up for some or all of the lost income that is more often than not the cause of FGs' lack of the social capital necessary to enroll in, stay in, and graduate from college, could be the best way to address their challenges. Our governments have spent enormous amounts of monies on projects that turned out to be bad investments of taxpayers' dollars. If FGs represent between one fourth and one third of the college population, society would gain more than it would lose by leveling the playing field for FGs.

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