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Facing the Culture Shock of College

First-generation college students talk about identity, class, and what helps them succeed.

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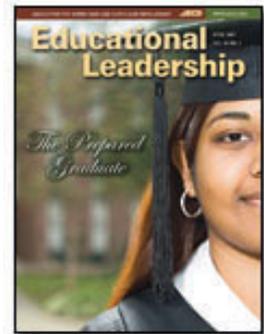
Milenny grew up in a Latino neighborhood of New York City that sits in the shadow of the George Washington Bridge. She worked hard in her public high school and won a scholarship to Wheaton College in suburban Massachusetts. Although her parents, immigrants from the Dominican Republic, pressured her to stay home, Milenny wanted to explore the larger world.

When she arrived at college, however, Milenny realized that she had new bridges to cross. At her high school, most students had come from low-income families of color; now she was joining a largely white student body accustomed to privilege and status. Moreover, after her first few weeks of college classes, her academic confidence was shaken. She recalled,

It was really hard for me at first. I never cried because I was homesick in college. The only reason I cried was because I felt dumb. One night I called my cousin and I was like, "I feel so stupid. I shouldn't be here."

During their first few months of college, many first-generation college students (those who are the first in their families to attend a four-year college) face the same hurdles Milenny did. They feel the tensions of entering new territory, and their parents are unable to reassure them. Their fellow college students often seem to be members of a club of insiders to which they do not belong. These kinds of cultural tensions may be one reason that almost one-fourth of first-generation students who enter four-year colleges in the United States do not return for a second year (Horn, 1998).

Throughout the past two years, 16 first-generation college students from around the United States shared their thoughts on this transition with me—and, through the two books that resulted, with younger students who would also be first in the family to attend college. All 16 were currently in college or had just graduated. They bluntly described the shock of arriving with far less academic preparation, money, and confidence than their peers with college-educated parents. And they recalled how they managed to pursue a college degree while staying true to themselves. Their stories can provide courage and insight to students still in



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high school—and to secondary educators who are striving to prepare students for a successful college experience.

Feeling Like Outsiders

First-generation students at community colleges will probably find many fellow students who share their backgrounds, because these colleges typically serve large numbers of low-income students and students of color. At a state university or private college, however, first-in-the-family students are often taken aback by the social and academic climate. Jackie, who entered Colorado University in Denver after attending high school in a low-income section of that city, commented,

I was so nervous going in there because all these white people were dressed nice and I could tell they had money; they probably went to really good schools. So I was intimidated.

In fact, Jackie found herself academically unprepared for the university's premedical program to which she aspired, although she did well in her humanities classes. After two years, she enrolled in science classes at the community college on the same campus. Far from being a step backward, this decision helped Jackie compensate for her inadequate high school science education and navigate toward a career in dentistry.

Differences in income, social styles, and even speech patterns cause many first-generation students to feel like outsiders. Their first concern is often to make friends, which invites all the difficult identity issues of late adolescence. It takes tremendous self-esteem and determination for them to focus on their academic goals.

Eric won admission to Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, after graduating from an urban high school in Nashville, Tennessee. Although he wanted to fit in with the exclusive social scene there, he sometimes felt that he would betray his black community by doing so. His classmates were friendly, but their assumptions made him deeply uncomfortable. Over the course of his first year, Eric learned to engage his peers directly in conversations about race, class, and privilege:

At first, I would go along with "you're ghetto." I was like, "I sure am from the projects!"—making a joke of something that I really took to be very serious. And that was not cool, just to go along with it. . . . I can't do that to you all who were raised up like me. So I don't play around with those racial jokes any more. If I'm going to be here and learn, if I'm going to accept different cultures and different styles, then you all gotta be at least a little respectful and acceptive of what I bring.

Raja, the son of Palestinian immigrants, grew up in a poor black section of Cleveland, and his tastes reflected hip-hop culture. Attending classes at Ohio's Kent State University, he often felt the sting of condescension. Raja, who was working 40 hours a week on top of a full course load, recognized that his best defense was to study even harder. He explained,

Some of the teachers look at me and they figure, "This guy's not here to learn. He looks like he's urban, his pants are sagging, he's got his hat on backward." They look

at what you wear and how you're walking and they're basically going to judge your personality on that. . . . Every year, every semester, half my classes were this way. I just had to get an A on their test, so they'd know that I'm not a clown.

Forging a Social Network

My student collaborators said they made it past these barriers by forging strong, supportive relationships that included both social and academic elements. Many of these connections started when students joined campus organizations for minority groups.

When Karen, a Native American student from a small community, entered Oklahoma State University, she felt overwhelmed by its size and impersonal atmosphere. Seeking out other Native American students on campus helped her feel grounded and discover her own leadership skills:

I think it's important that we find our niche, find people like us. There's a special house where a lot of Native Americans live, and there's a Native students' club; we have powwows and take trips.

Maly, who emigrated from China to Venezuela and then to New York City, won a scholarship to Lafayette College in rural Pennsylvania. She sought refuge from "a sea of white faces" in the international students' association, where, she explained,

They're so welcoming. Everybody's integrating. It's not just about one culture or one person. We're learning about everybody. We're learning about everything.

Stephen, a Mexican American student from Austin, Texas, found other students from his culture who were pushing hard to succeed when he joined a Latino fraternity at the University of Texas. He noted,

A lot of my fraternity brothers are first-generation college students. They know what it was like to grow up in a humble household, for your parents not to be able to support you in the ways they wanted to. They don't have a lot of the same motivations and pushes as white students, but they are very determined, and I really appreciate and respect that.

Students who receive such support from the beginning often learn to enjoy standing out in the crowd. At Kent State, Raja realized that part of his education was to explore the mix of people around him, discovering who they were as he made a place for himself. He said,

My campus has 30,000 people on it, so when you're walking to class, you're walking with 5,000 to 6,000 people. Some sense inside of you wants to be different from others. And you are different—everybody's different, no matter where you're from. You just have to have an open mind about where you're going. You'll always find a group of people that have your same interests, who are there to learn and enjoy it, just like you.

Maly also developed a new sense of who she was and what she stood for:

I've grown very confident of what I believe in and what I am. Being in a very

homogeneous college, it's very easy to either go *their* way or completely isolate yourself from them. But I've learned how to stay in between—still participating in social events that they go to, but doing it in my own way. Always, always, stay true to yourself.

The Need for a Guiding Hand

Because parents of first-generation students can't draw on their own college experiences for advice and reassurance, these students need guidance from other caring adults. One guidance counselor at a large Chicago high school sat down every Saturday morning in the fall to check in by phone with students he had sent off to college that year.

During Eric's first semester at Wake Forest, he kept in close touch with teachers who had mentored him. He noted,

My high school teachers are still behind me. I've gotta call, 'cause they'll find out I'm struggling. If I'm having trouble in my class, they're like, "We know somebody who's going to give you a call tomorrow." And when I go back, they use me as an example for other kids.

When faculty members reach out to first-generation students, they can provide not just academic coaching but also a crucial lift in confidence. Milenny found that her fluency in Spanish helped her do well in a freshman Italian course—and that an additional boost came from the warmth of the professors in that department:

A lot of other professors were scared to break that barrier with the students, but my Italian professors were encouraging. They tried to make me feel comfortable; they told me, "You can do it!" Little things like that, for me, made a big difference.

Milenny ended up majoring in Italian and studying abroad.

College programs that link students and faculty in some way beyond large, impersonal classes make it more likely that first-year students will persist (Tinto, 2000). For example, at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio, freshmen may join smaller "learning communities" where students with similar interests and goals live and study together. This helps freshmen on this campus of 20,000 students bond socially and academically with other freshmen, upperclassmen, resident advisors, and faculty members.

Learning to Shift Between Cultures

In their reflections on the college transition, these students revealed what a challenge it has been to remain true to themselves in an environment where they differ from the norm. Keeping that balance means changing, but it also means remembering their roots. They learn what both the old and new settings call for, and they continually move in and out of different cultures. As Milenny explained,

For me, going away was more of a learning experience than probably everything I learned in college. You learn more about life than about academics. I came back and saw everything so differently.

Many students I talked with realized they had a lot to teach more affluent, mainstream students about adjusting to new cultures. As Eric said,

A lot of people at college have led sheltered lives. . . . They grew up where it's easy to get away from people not like them. I'm not going to be fake with anybody; I want to be as real as I possibly can. Sometimes they teach me stuff; sometimes I teach them stuff. I mean, that's college for you.

When Stephanie took a course in Latino studies at Bowling Green, she found herself talking comfortably for the first time in a mixed group about race and ethnicity:

Everyone was speaking their mind, and the minority in that class was Caucasian people. It definitely helped you feel like you're not leaving your people behind. Maybe we [Latinos] didn't all come from the exact same background, but we pretty much felt the same way about different things we talked about in class. Which is really different, and it opened up the eyes of the white kids in the class.

Just by getting to college, students like Milenny, Eric, and Stephanie have scaled a wall that keeps thousands of capable students from higher education because their race, origin, social class, or family income differ from the mainstream. The thorny issues of identity, privilege, and cultural understanding will continue to confront them as they make their way toward college graduation. If educators support them in the task, first-generation students will emerge with a strong new identity as college-educated adults.

How Can Secondary Educators Help?

Students who are the first in their families to attend college will be better equipped to face issues of race, class, and college preparedness—and more likely to graduate from college—if secondary educators focus early on five key strategies.

- *Inform.* Help students approach college with their eyes wide open about the systemic obstacles that may face them. (See “Hard Facts” at www.firstinthefamily.org.)
- *Supplement.* Make sure that high school classes involve not just test-prep material but the deeper reading, writing, and inquiry that college requires. Help students take classes at community and state colleges in the later years of high school. Direct students toward summer programs like Upward Bound (www.ed.gov/programs/trioupbound/index.html), through which high schoolers spend several weeks living and studying on a college campus. Students who take part in Upward Bound are four times more likely to earn an undergraduate degree than are students from similar backgrounds who don't participate.
- *Support.* Focus college advising resources on students and families with the least knowledge of the system, who need extra support in choosing colleges,

applying, and getting financial aid. Show students how to research colleges using the Internet. Keep the family in the loop throughout the guidance process. To help students plan as well as dream, give them the First in the Family year-by-year planning checklists (available at www.firstinthefamily.org), which help students keep track of steps taken in grades 9 through 12 toward college acceptance. The College Board's Web site provides tools for navigating the application process (www.collegeboard.com).

- *Connect*. Invite recent graduates from your school who have attended two years of college to speak to your classes. Take students on field trips to local college campuses, and encourage dual enrollment in college classes wherever possible. The Center for Student Opportunity has a Web site geared toward first-generation, low-income college hopefuls (www.csocollegecenter.org) that allows students to ask college counselors questions online. Black Excel also shares college-preparation information on its Web site (www.blackexcel.org).
- *Encourage*. Students will rise to your expectations. Give them opportunities to think like college students, and coach them in how to do so. Talk with them about their dreams for the future, and help them map out a course to get there.

—Kathleen Cushman

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