

# UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING THE FIRST-GENERATION DOCTORAL STUDENT

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# First-Generation Students

- First-generation students are those whose parents did not receive a college degree
  - ▣ 55.3% of students in 2007-2008

(U.S. Department of Education, 2009)

# First-Generation Attributes

- First-generation students tend to:
  - ▣ Have lower degree aspirations (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005)
  - ▣ Be less likely to persist to graduation (Pike & Kuh, 2005)
  - ▣ Have less engagement with faculty and integration with peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005)
  - ▣ Be women, older, students of color, from lower socioeconomic status backgrounds, and have more dependent children (Terenzini et al., 1996)

# First-Generation Mainers

## □ Given that...

- ▣ Over 64% of Mainers do not have a college degree
- ▣ 81% of Maine high school students stayed in Maine in 2006 for their higher education

(The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac, 2009)

- Maine institutions of higher education can expect to have a particularly high proportion of first-generation students among their attendees

# First-Generation Doctoral Students

- 37% of those who received their doctorates in 2002 were considered first-generation doctoral students
- First-generation doctoral students are more likely to:
  - ▣ Be women
  - ▣ Be students of color
  - ▣ Have attended community college
  - ▣ Identify own resources as primary financial support
  - ▣ Have more debt upon graduation
  - ▣ Register a longer time to degree (Hoffer et al., 2002)
- These indicators are also those of individuals who are more likely to drop out of doctoral programs (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004)

# Accumulated (Dis)Advantage

- First-generation students:
  - ▣ May begin their school experiences without the same social or financial resources as their peers (Pike & Kuh, 2005)
  - ▣ Are less likely to graduate (Pike & Kuh, 2005)
  - ▣ Take longer to complete their degree (Goldrick-Rab, 2006)
  - ▣ May be less likely to attend a selective institution (Kniffin, 2007)
- All of these factors negatively impact enrollment in, and completion of, a doctoral program (CGS, 2005)

# First-Generation Doctoral Recipients

1. Wayne State University (49.7%)
  2. **The University of Maine (47.9%)**
  3. West Virginia University (46.8%)
  4. **The University of Alabama (46.0%)**
  5. The University of Tennessee (43.3%)
  6. Iowa State University (42.6%)
  7. Temple University (41.7%)
  8. Oklahoma State University (41.2%)
  9. University of Kentucky (40.8%)
  10. SUNY at Buffalo (40.6%)
- (SED data, 2008)

# First-Generation Doctoral Students in Education

- Doctoral programs in education have the highest proportion of first-generation doctoral students  
(Hoffer et al., 2002; Nettles & Millett, 2006)
  - In 2006, of all doctoral recipients earning a doctoral degree in education:
    - 58.5% of their fathers and 67.3% of their mothers had received a high school diploma or completed some college
- (Across fields, these percentages were 40.6% and 53.1% respectively)



# Current Study

- While we know an increasing percentage of doctoral students are first-generation we do not yet know the experiences of these students
- Several research questions guided this study:
  - ▣ What are the experiences of first-generation doctoral students?
    - What is their educational pathway to graduate school?
    - What are their sources of challenge and support?

# Capital: A Framework

- Three forms of capital: economic, social, cultural
- Bourdieu (1977) described social capital as the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – in other words, to membership in a group” (p. 103)
- First-generation students lack social capital given many of their other characteristics and seek cultural capital as a form of educational credential, thereby leading to economic capital

# Methods

- Qualitative approach – allowed for an understanding of the lived experiences of these students (Seidman, 2006)
- Interviews with 10 first-generation doctoral students at UMaine and 10 at the University of Alabama
  - ▣ Diversity in disciplines, program status, gender, race
- Lasted 60-90 minutes
- Guided by semi-structured protocol
- Audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim

# UMaine Participants

Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Discipline	Program Status	From Maine
F	White	History	Coursework	No
F	White	History	Dissertation	Yes
F	White	Forestry	Coursework	No
F	White	Interdisciplinary studies	Coursework	Yes
M	White	Biochemistry	Coursework	No
M	Hispanic	History	Dissertation	No
F	White	Interdisciplinary studies	Dissertation	Yes
F	White	Counseling	Coursework	Yes
F	White	Literacy	Dissertation	No
F	White	Literacy	Exams	Yes

# UA Participants

Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Discipline	Program Status	From Alabama
F	White	Psychology	Coursework	No
F	White	Chemistry	Dissertation	No
F	White	Psychology	Dissertation	No
M	African American	English	Dissertation	No
F	White	Political science	Coursework	Yes
F	African American, Hispanic	Chemistry	Coursework	No
F	White	History	Dissertation	No
F	White	English	Dissertation	Yes
F	African American	Social work	Exams	No
M	African American	Social Work	Coursework	Yes

# Data Analysis

- Constant comparative method
- Guided by the theoretical framework provided by Bourdieu (1977) in relation to capital
- Utilized Glaser's (1978) steps in data analysis, allowing for emergent themes to develop from the data
- Trustworthiness of the data collected and its subsequent analysis was obtained through member checking and peer debriefing

# Findings

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- Four themes emerged:
  - ▣ Breaking the Chain
  - ▣ Knowing the Rules
  - ▣ Living in Two Worlds
  - ▣ Seeking Support

# Breaking the Chain

- Breaking the chains of the past, of their gender, and their socioeconomic status:
  - ▣ “I guess that their expectations were that my older brother would go. Their perspective was that he was a man and he would have to support a family and I, on the other hand, would get married and be supported.”
  - ▣ “I think it was more or less of looking at how hard my parents had struggled for such a long time: we’re talking basic, entry-level, labor-intensive-type positions that both of them held during their lives. I didn’t want to do that.”



# Breaking the Chain

- Breaking the chains for future generations:
  - ▣ “I guess that is one benefit to being a first-generation student or being from where I am is that you are sort of breaking the chain, and I like it. The way I look at it is that I’m happy that it is me doing it because I don’t want it to be my daughter’s responsibility.”

# Knowing the Rules

- Even those who wanted to did not know how to access the system:
  - ▣ “If you got football you can to go to school. Well, I didn’t have football so it was obvious I wasn’t going because I didn’t know you could go to school without football. That line of thinking was not in my world of knowledge and understanding.”

# Breaking the Chain

- It was learning how to break the chain that was the most difficult:
  - ▣ “It was always my parents’ desire for me to go to college but they didn’t know where to start.”
- But one person made the difference:
  - ▣ “That was the first time someone had plugged that into my head.”

# Knowing the Rules

- Once you access, where do you go?
  - ▣ “I didn’t know what to look for or what to have. I just thought you went to the cheapest one. Why would you go to anything else? I didn’t understand the value of going to a school that might have a nice name and what that might help with later. I had no idea what the point was. I don’t think I understood that and I still don’t think I understood what that meant when I was applying to grad schools.”

# Knowing the Rules

- The obstacles only just began after access:
  - “I had to study twice as hard to learn how to maneuver in and out of the system, how to work the system, how to learn. There was no one telling me what a FAFSA was, for example. I had to learn this. No one taught me anything; I am learning it. I’m learning it as I go.”
  - ▣ “Their parents are educated and have degrees so they kind of know what the system is and how it work it and how to apply that directly to what was expected of them. For me, I kind of have to feel my way around and learn as I go.”

# Living in Two Worlds

- Needing to belong – anywhere:
  - ▣ “In a way I’m kind of caught in between these two groups: the working-class group and the world of academia. I don’t fully belong to either group anymore. I kind of have one foot straddling that line.”
  - ▣ “I’m here but I really don’t belong in terms of class, in terms of gender, in terms of race, I don’t belong. I don’t belong. And everything is saying that I don’t belong but I am getting messages that say I do belong and I have a place here. I think if I had been second-generation, I wouldn’t have any doubts. I wouldn’t feel like it is hard to go back to my community because I am in a different class. I’m in a different position.”

# Living in Two Worlds

- Needing understanding of their choices:
  - ▣ “Most of my family would have preferred if I had gone to college that I would’ve gotten something like an accounting degree, something practical, something that you could go get a job. They really didn’t understand it and the more I went to school the more it just confused the hell out of them. They look at me kind of like a two-headed chicken or something.”

# Living in Two Worlds

- Feeling a sense of separation and loss:
  - ▣ “You can’t really act educated when you go home, you know, because they think you are uppity. I actually had a couple of my cousins tell me that I don’t even talk the same: ‘You don’t sound like you’re supposed to sound when you come home.’”
  - ▣ “I’m still living in this dream that doesn’t call for reality – the reality of me remembering where I come from.”



# Living in Two Worlds

## □ Questioning themselves:

- ▣ “The hardest thing is thinking that someone is going to find out that I really shouldn’t be here, even though it is something that I have worked so hard for. And I have to remind myself constantly that I have a right to be here. I have to keep telling myself.”

# Seeking Support

- To manage these difficulties they needed support:
  - ▣ “I’m looking for some sort of mentor, parental – intellectual parent-substitute in a way. I want someone who’s there already who can kind of help guide me through. You’ve got to have two kinds of families.”
  - ▣ “A lot of other students are too intimidated to ask a professor a question because they don’t want to sound stupid, where I’m like, ‘Hell, whatever, I’ll go ask; I’m already at a deficit.’”

# Seeking Support

- Finding support in peers
  - ▣ “The grad students here, we all belong together; we help each other out. That’s really where I have benefited. A lot of the other grad students in history have parents who have Ph.D.s; they know the process.”
- Finding support in themselves:
  - ▣ “I had an inner drive, prayer, faith. I had an inner drive to succeed, a competitive drive to succeed, and I don’t know why, you know, because I could have easily went another route.”

# Discussion

*“I feel like I’m doing it for my family and the people who have gone before them. I find comfort in it. I find strength in it, and it sustains me.”*

- A lack of capital for these students translated into:
  - ▣ A lack of access to higher education
  - ▣ A lack of understanding of its benefits or its functioning at the undergraduate and graduate levels
- They were able to overcome these deficits through others’ capital and access and their own internal motivation

# Discussion

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- They faced myriad obstacles to succeed
  - ▣ Cultural barriers
  - ▣ Separation from their background and families
  - ▣ Financial burdens
  - ▣ Imposter phenomenon

# Implications

- K-12 educators and counselors
  - ▣ What you say makes a difference...and it only takes a few words
  - ▣ Provide opportunities to “learn the system” and seek out resources to make it possible for both parents and students
  - ▣ Seek out your own professional development opportunities to understand how you can make a difference and learn about the options available to and correlates of success for first-generation students

# Implications

- Higher education faculty and administrators
  - ▣ Provide access to supportive programs such as McNair and TRiO
  - ▣ Explicitly encourage students to consider graduate education
  - ▣ Infuse understandings of graduate education into personal and class discussions (i.e., build a cognitive map)
  - ▣ Understand the needs and challenges of first-generation students and provide supportive services

# Implications

- Federal and state agencies
  - ▣ Increase funding for programs such as TRiO
  - ▣ Provide information and expand resources for first-generation parents earlier in the K-12 experience
  - ▣ Encourage professional associations (CACREP) to require courses in higher education for guidance counselors
  - ▣ Provide training and professional development opportunities for community colleges
  - ▣ Create more K-20 connections



# Implications

- Future studies should examine:
  - ▣ Institutional type variations
  - ▣ Gender, race, age, familial status, educational background
  - ▣ Disciplinary/field differences
  - ▣ Attitudinal correlates such as imposter syndrome and self-efficacy
  - ▣ Longitudinal pathways (careers, satisfaction, success)



Questions? Comments?

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