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First-Generation College Students: Understanding and Improving the Experience from Recruitment to Commencement

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Abstract

This book review examines *First Generation College Students* a new book published by Jossey-Bass publishers. An offering of a reframing of the book's main arguments through Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth frameworks provides for a holistic and anti-deficit framing of this population.

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First-Generation College Students: Understanding and Improving the Experience from Recruitment to Commencement by Lee Ward, Michael J. Siegel, Zebulun Davenport. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2012, 176 pp., \$37.38 hardcover.

Review by Dian Squire, Loyola University Chicago

First-generation students are typically defined as students with parents who do not have a degree higher than a high school diploma. It has been demonstrated that they tend to enroll on college campuses at higher rates than most administrators expect and face many barriers to success (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004). Research shows that these students are more likely to be women, to be from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, to enroll at two-year colleges, and to attend public institutions (Hottiger & Rose, 2006; Pascarella et al., 2004). The book *First-Generation College Students: Understanding and Improving the Experience from Recruitment to Commencement* by Lee Ward, Michael J. Siegel, and Zebulun Davenport (2012) explores the experiences of this student population through the examination of the role of capital in student success, and overall institutional shortfalls that fail to support students financially and organizationally. It examines the experiences of first-generation college students in today's college setting by exploring what makes this population unique and highlights a common concern for these students in U.S. higher education institutions – a lack of capital. Appropriately, the authors explore students' transitions into college as well as throughout college. They also provide key suggestions on how administrators can transform their college campuses to support first-generation students. Thus, the book continues to fill a gap in the literature around first-generation college students.

However, while it appears to be a necessary book for any administrator's canon on underserved populations, this book fails to critically examine the experiences of first-generation college students. By utilizing Critical Race Theory (CRT; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billing, 2009) and Tara Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework, this review challenges the assumptions presented by the book's authors. CRT and community cultural wealth highlight a counter-narrative not explored in this book and works against the normalized master narrative often written about when describing first-generation college students.

Book Organization

The organization of *First-Generation College Students* leads the reader through a logical progression by providing an overview of first-generation students, their entrance into college, their educational experiences in college, and best practices for serving this population. Chapter

1 attempts to clarify what defines a first-generation college student. As there are many different understandings of first-generation students, the authors ultimately decide that first-generation college students are “those whose parents have no education beyond high school” (p. 4). This definition helps to clarify the authors’ positionality when discussing this population. The authors begin to discuss the role of capital in the first-generation college student experience and provide statistical evidence around the significance of their study. They also attempt to look at these students holistically.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore student transitions by examining the barriers to first-generation student success (e.g., financial constraints, unrealistic expectations, underpreparedness) and the role of self-efficacy in academic achievement. The authors also highlight successful programs that support first-year, first-generation college students. They explore campus life experiences (e.g., resident life, classroom concerns) and provide an overview of some of the concerns these students face on a daily basis, such as having to spend more hours working off-campus and commuting to class compared to their peers. More examples of campus programs conclude Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 is a problematic chapter titled “Class, culture, race, and ethnicity.” The authors address these social categories as individual, non-intersecting components of a first-generation college student’s identity. They make gross assumptions about these students and provide few practical implications beyond recommending continued support for TRIO programs. Meanwhile, the last two chapters (Chapters 5 and 6) argue for a reconceptualization of how practitioners work with first-generation college students. After an out-of-place discussion on organizational restructuring and strategic planning, the authors develop a learning matrix designed to help student affairs administrators plan holistic programming for first-generation college students. Lastly, they authors provide a timeline for creating campus change that includes short-term and long-term goals.

A Critical Race and Community Cultural Wealth Analysis

As previously noted, embedded within *First-Generation College Students* is a 15-page chapter entitled “Class, Culture, Race, and Ethnicity” (pp. 69-84). There are only seven pages within the entire book that actually cover issues of class, culture, race, and ethnicity (p. 70-74 and p. 76-78), and they are located within this particular chapter (though there is sporadic recognition throughout the book that first-generation students are more likely to come from underrepresented social groups, such as underrepresented racial/ethnic groups, low-socioeconomic status, and women). The authors note:

Because first-generation students can be understood as distinct from non-first-generation students based on variables (such as grade point average, socioeconomic status, academic preparation, and so on) that are important to enrollment managers, faculty, and student affairs practitioners, we will describe them generally. . . . Because individual first-generation students are not readily identified and may cut across all or some of the aforementioned groups [e.g., racial, ethnic, religious, and gender groups], we often have not afforded them such [individual] attention. (p. 12)

These statements demonstrate how the authors immediately shift the onus of exploring the experiences of people of color onto the reader while simultaneously disconnecting first-generation students from the interlocking historical connections between race, socioeconomic status, immigration status, educational attainment and preparation (Omi & Winant, 1994; Shankar, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). A more integrated and fluid analysis of first-generation students would provide a more critical, engaging, realistic, and revealing understanding of the challenges and successes of this population in the context of U.S. higher education.

The integration of these social identities begins with the centralizing of race within the discussion of first-generation students and how they intersect with ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and immigration status. Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a framework through which one can analyze this population's particular experiences. It centralizes race and racism as "normal, not aberrant, in American society" (Delgado, 1995 as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 21). It utilizes storytelling and non-dominant forms of scholarship to forward narratives, stories, and critical perspectives of the experiences of people of color normally untold or negated by White society. It challenges dominant ideologies and the assumption that all laws, theories, and frameworks apply to all people equally, when, in reality, they predominantly apply to White people (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) added that CRT works towards creating socially just communities and provides transdisciplinary perspectives, or those that "analyze race and racism within both historical and contemporary contexts, drawing on scholarship from ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, law, psychology, film, theatre and other fields" (p. 74).

Unfortunately, *First-Generation College Students* fails to critically examine the experiences of first-generation college students because the authors do not centralize race, do not challenge dominant ideologies, and do not attempt to confront deficit models of thinking. If the authors utilized a CRT framework, then they may have revealed that first-generation students do not necessarily have "lower educational aspirations" (p. 17) or "select institutions

that are less academically rigorous” (p. 17) by choice. Rather, educational institutions can be “characterized by overt and hidden curricula, tracking, dominant and subordinate cultures, and competing class ideologies” (Giroux, 1983, p. 260). They can also be seen as working toward perpetuating an underclass of people (that includes first-generation college students) who have little to no power (Althusser, 1970; Omi & Winant, 1994). The result is a tracking of first-generation students into mindsets where students do not have the efficacy to persist and a tracking into institutions that may not be as prestigious or rigorous (Omi & Winant, 1994). This deficit thinking can be detrimental to first-generation student success.

Yosso (2005) described deficit thinking as “the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because: (a) students enter school without the normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (b) parents neither value nor support their child’s education” (p. 75). Sadly, the authors of *First-Generation College Students* examine first-generation students through a deficit framework. Broken into academic, personal, social, and cultural factors, they provide a list of integration factors that is full of deficit-framed statements. For example, the authors write that first-generation students “lack commitment to the academic process,” have “difficulty in coping with academic requirements,” and have a “lack of knowledge concerning home institution’s norms, values, behaviors, beliefs, traditions, symbols, language, and so on” (p. 63). Not only do these statements ignore historical contexts, but they also assume that the structure, function, and culture of academic institutions are normal for all individuals. These sentiments are repeated when the authors argue that “first-generation students, especially those from racial and ethnic minority groups, often find it stressful to shed the values of their home and community and take on those of the campus” (Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012, p. 56). Statements like these not only privilege a dominant mindset and class of people, but they continue to marginalize and oppress people of color, people with low socioeconomic status, women, and immigrants (Giroux, 1983; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001) – individuals who typically comprise first-generation student populations.

No conversation on first-generation college students is complete without a discussion of capital. Of particular interest to scholars is the role of cultural capital in the success of this population, with a major focus on how first-generation college students lack the institutional knowledge required to navigate the admissions process, enrollment, and the first year of college (Hottiger & Rose, 2006). Without a doubt, cultural capital, or social assets that stimulate social mobility, plays an integral role in the success of all students in higher education. Yet, cultural capital is not accrued by everybody equally nor defined complexly (Bourdieu, 1986; Yosso, 2005). Rather, cultural capital “exposes White, middle class culture as the standard, and

therefore, all other forms and expressions of 'culture' are judged in comparison to this 'norm'" (Yosso, 2005, p. 76). The authors of *First-Generation College Students* fail to address and complicate cultural capital; thus, they perpetuate the notion of a Whiteness idea of capital.

In *First-Generation College Students*, Ward, Siegel, and Davenport (2012) make multiple arguments that first-generation students lack aspirations to enroll and succeed in higher education. In contrast, Yosso (2005) would argue that first-generation students have many different types of capital. Her community cultural wealth model provides six distinct types of capital that inform cultural capital in communities of difference. One type is aspirational capital, defined as the ability to "maintain hopes and dreams of the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Research has shown that people of color do, in fact, aspire to enroll in college (Rose, 2012; Shankar, 2008; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Yosso, 2005). Therefore, it appears that the authors of *First-Generation College Students* privilege a society that is educated entirely by two- and four-year liberal arts and research universities rather than recognizing the wide-range of technical and vocational schools educating workers in technology (Shankar, 2008), agriculture, mechanics, and other fields that do not require two- and four-year college degrees (Rose, 2012). By looking down on technical and vocational education, researchers assume that first-generation students who enter these programs aspire less than their non-first-generation peers to enroll in colleges (Pascarella, et al., 2004; Ward, Siegel, & Davenport, 2012).

To remove deficit thinking, the concept of capital must be thought about, articulated, and utilized in more complex ways. Doing so allows administrators and researchers to use first-generation students' experiences, critical viewpoints, histories, and community wealth to help them become successful college students. For instance, one may utilize student counter-narratives to help understand the student experience within the university context. Or, administrators can utilize participatory action research methods to help students identify and conduct research that is central to their experience on college campuses. This praxis will centralize student experiences and most certainly highlight community wealth constructs.

Discussion

Ward, Siegel, and Davenport's (2012) addition to the educational canon on underserved populations through the publication of *First-Generation College Students*, while needed, falls short of expectations for explaining the experiences of first-generation college students. Ultimately, the authors' may be unaware of their own privileges and how they shape their understanding of capital frameworks. Their privileged positionality may have influenced how

they view the experiences of this population and led to the lack of a critical lens. Their narrative describes first-generation college students as lacking aspirations and capital, and fails to describe the many systems of oppression that act as barriers to success for these students. While first-generation students may have unique experiences that place them at a disadvantage, the authors could have utilized a critical framework to reveal their strengths and to place a greater emphasis on changing institutional structures rather than changing the students themselves.

What the authors of *First-Generation College Students* fail to suggest is that administrators need to recognize and appreciate the many ways that capital is exhibited by first-generation college students. Capital does not show itself in one form, but rather as a conglomeration of many different forms of community wealth that can be wielded to support first-generation students (Yosso, 2005). The normalized historical understanding of capital has been constructed around White society's understanding of capital. Holistic conceptualizations of capital can support people of color and marginalized communities and do not disconnect the community from the school.

A more complete picture of the educational experiences of first-generation students can be constructed by providing greater attention to their K-12 experiences and the underlying systemic issues that impact those experiences and influence their future academic success in college. Ultimately, first-generation college students have every chance of being as successful as the next student, but certain unsupportive educational organizations do not make it easy to navigate the educational pipeline unscarred. *First-Generation College Students* purports to share the experiences of first-generation college students, but rather, the book simplifies the experiences of this group in an attempt to redirect the problem away from the institution and on to the students themselves. What could have been a win for all students instead turns into a loss for first-generation students and a clear conscience for educational administrators unwilling to critically examine higher education institutions.

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