

GIVING STUDENTS A VOICE: LEARNING THROUGH AUTOBIOGRAPHY

by *Laura Nichols*

In writing my story I was at first uncomfortable about people knowing that my family and I depended on welfare and about our present living situation. But I realize that I need to tell my complete story so that other students experiencing similar things will not be ashamed of their own backgrounds.”

In the Social Stratification course I teach, students write journal entries exploring the connections between concepts introduced in class and their own lives. What students express in these journal entries is sometimes more effective in illustrating course concepts than the course readings. First-generation college students, like the student quoted above, are particularly able to make such connections.¹ These students understand that race, class, and gender intersect in complex ways to affect people’s lives. They describe being squeezed between working class and middle/upper class values and expectations; they notice how opportunity and privilege—sometimes very subtly—structure experience, and what it means when assets and resources are only available to some. They identify barriers and contradictions in the university system that make it difficult to fulfill their dreams and become a part of the college community. Both insiders and outsiders, pushed and pulled, they provide insight into the assumptions and purposes of higher education by talking about what it is like to be on the margins of the university.

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Autobiographies by academics from the working class tell similar stories about the challenges and opportunities of those not initially groomed and trained for the academy.² Yet the life histories and examples of the dilemmas faced by professors can be difficult for undergraduate students to grasp. There are few published books or essays written by undergraduate students about their experiences, experiences that all undergraduate students could relate to and use to compare themselves to and against. And students are often uncomfortable revealing personal information in class discussions.

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To overcome these limitations, many instructors are discovering the power of teaching autobiographies or of having students write their own autobiographies so they can make intimate connections with the material they are learning.³ Ron Scapp says: "When one speaks from the perspective of one's immediate experiences, something is created in the classroom for students, sometimes for the very first time. Focusing on

experience allows students to claim a knowledge base from which they can speak."⁴ Beyond a learning tool, autobiographies about students' college experiences also provide insight for faculty, staff, and administrators about the needs of our students as well as making explicit some of the inner workings of our colleges and universities.

In this article, I share what our university community is learning by presenting information culled from the autobiographies of 11 first-generation college students written for my social stratification class. The student authors each wrote a chapter and were paid a small stipend for their contributions to the volume.⁵ The volume is now being used in various classes and by a number of university departments to better understand what contributes to college attendance and success.

The number of first-generation college students on college campuses is growing.⁶ However, many students who would be first-generation college students are not even eligible to apply to most four-year colleges and universities. Only 29 percent of high school students whose parents had a high school diploma or less and who in the 10th grade said they had aspirations of obtaining a bachelor's degree had taken the SAT or ACT before they graduated. This compares to 78 percent of high school students taking the tests where at least one of their parents had a bachelor's degree or higher.⁷ Yet, despite these differences, first-generation college students now make up about half of the college student population.

Most first-generation students attend community colleges, and some go on to four-year universities.⁸ Few first-generation students attend private, four-year universities such as ours. This can make adjusting to the college experience alienating and frustrating for those who do. The potential challenges first-generation college students face can also be exacerbated because these students are more likely to belong to a racial minority group, to come from families with few economic resources, and/or to be first-generation immigrants to the United States. Reading about the experiences of our students can help us to better understand how to meet their needs.

There are two factors that seem to make the difference in helping first-generation students get to college. One is the presence of mentors in high school. One student, Clara, explains why her high school basketball coach came with her, her mother, and two siblings to help her move into the residence hall her first day of college:

Most first-generation students attend community colleges, and some go on to four-year universities. Few attend private, four-year universities.

The reason my basketball coach came along was because he played a major role in my decision to attend college. Throughout high school my coach was a father-figure and practically adopted me...his son had attended this university and had a positive experience (and as a result) I was more interested in this school over others.

The second major factor that influences first-generation students' college attendance is participation in programs that expose students to college preparation early on and make sure they are doing what is necessary to be college-bound. For Naomi, this was a program called Advancement Via Individual Determination,

...which was determined to get 'at risk' kids into college. I had taken a math class that was connected to the program the summer before I went into high school and they automatically enrolled me in the class the following school year. Students take this class for four years with the same teacher and we receive tutoring, preparation for the SATs, and eventually college. We visited numerous colleges in the area and worked closely with a college counselor.

A program for students identified as "gifted" was important for Rosanna: "Beginning in elementary school I was tested for and placed in the GATE program...I also participated in an after-school mentoring pro-

gram called 'Latinas Guiding Latinas' and a youth outreach program." She states that although some college representatives visited her high school and she received a lot of information about different universities, she had "no idea what to look for in schools. I knew I wanted to go to college, but beyond that I had no guidance as to how to sort through the information I was receiving and how to decide which campus would be the best for me."

Parents can be supportive of their children going to college but often do not know how best to provide support for their children. Jeannine says:

It's not that my parents did not want me to go to college. It's more that they assumed that because none of my other siblings went very far in their college experiences, I wouldn't either. Of course my parents were very proud of me when I decided to go to college. But I know that for both of my parents college and university life is a huge mystery. While they are very supportive of all my endeavors I get the feeling that they really would not know what to do if I asked them for help. I did everything on my own that pertained to attending college—everything from retrieving information on colleges, to applying, to orientation.

Phil writes of his uncertainty about getting into college:

For my whole life going to college has been something that I always expected to do, but how this dream would be accomplished was unclear.



There were no college graduates in my family. There was no college fund or money for college. I didn't know a thing about applying to college... The main person who helped me out with college was my best friend's mother. His mother saw that I was in need of help when it came to college. She invited me on a college scouting trip with her, my best friend, and his father...they didn't make me pay for anything—flights, hotels, and food were fully paid for. I got the break that all under-privileged kids trying to prosper in life desire: someone who just wanted to help me fulfill my dreams and aspirations.

Some students were discouraged from attending a four-year school. William says that while in high school:

I gradually began to understand that the only way out of my situation was through higher education. I understood that an education was the key to upward mobility. In an effort to reach my goal of going to college I worked hard throughout high school to get the best grades

possible. Just when I thought that the path to higher education would not be hindered, educators at my high school began to discourage me from attending a four-year university. I was told many times that 'that university is too much for you. Why not a community college, there are more people like you [Latino] there.'⁹

A cousin who attended college convinced William that he should apply anyway.

Once first-generation college students make it to college, they can experience other obstacles. On campuses with few first-generation students, they begin to worry that they are "different." Adela describes getting-acquainted activities at the first floor meeting in her residence hall:

During this first session the Resident Assistant asked for a show of hands of individuals who were first-generation college students. I remember looking around the room in agony as I saw no movement or anyone raising their hands. After a long silent wait, there were three of us in a group of 40 or 50 students who finally raised our hands. I remember my heart racing and my face turning red. I waited for something to follow that up, some words of wisdom, maybe some advice. To my utter disappointment there was nothing to follow, just the next category. It had

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become apparent to me that I had just unveiled a deep secret. I felt as though I was standing naked in front of the entire room with everyone watching. I wondered what other students were thinking. Did they think I was intellectually inferior to them? That I might not make it? Did they pity me?...I knew that if the majority of students in the room had parents who were educated, that probably meant that they had sufficient funds to send their children here. I suddenly felt out of place because my parents were not educated, and most certainly did not have the funds to pay for me being here.

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Research has found that first-generation college students often have a difficult time balancing the demands of family life and being a college student.¹⁰ Many students try to solve this problem by going to a school close to home, which can make things even more difficult because distance then cannot be used as an excuse for having to miss family functions or visits. William writes:

I felt like I was living in two different worlds with two different roles. While at school, I lived the life as a student. When at home I was a son who was part of a traditional Mexican family. Many times I was forced to separate myself from family traditions to pursue my role as a student. Every year I had to leave family functions early to finish a research paper or to study for a midterm.

Nhu-Y says:

I was taught that family always comes first, which made my freshman year difficult. The separation was challenging because I was very close to my family, but by wanting to live at school I felt like I was rejecting my family.

Parents who have not attended college often do not know how to best help their children. These parents might not understand the extra time that their children need to study, meet for group projects, or complete other projects. Further, it is difficult for parents of first-generation students to counsel them about college-related issues such as dropping a class, what to major in, or how to deal with a difficult professor.

Vanessa saw how different it was talking to her parents compared with her roommate, whose father was a college professor:

Aside from language barriers early on, it was frustrating for me to learn

that many of my friends could rely on their parents for help with school-work while I could not. On more than a few occasions in college I called my mom, bawling about doing poorly in chemistry or calculus, only to find that there was no way I could make her understand the problems I was having. The fact that she was always so sympathetic made me feel guilty for not studying more.

The overall experience on campus also tends to be different for many first-generation students. First-generation students are less likely to be involved in campus activities, and they report less interaction with faculty than do other students.¹¹ Further, it is likely that parents who have college backgrounds have been able to provide their children cultural capital through travel, literature, and museums—things that can help give students background knowledge in philosophy, history, or literature classes they might encounter later in college.

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William writes about not having these advantages:

Art History classes were courses that I enjoyed because of the content and knowledge that I acquired. Yet I felt at a disadvantage because when we learned about the great architecture of Rome or Versailles, other students in the class would be able to describe the visits they had with their families to these places. These places were unfamiliar to me. Even if my family knew about these places, we could never afford such expensive trips.

The increased likelihood of first-generation students coming from low-income families means that financing their educations is usually a major issue. Most of the students work many hours in addition to having full course loads and trying to fulfill family obligations. Nationally, 33-percent of first-generation college students work full time while attending college compared with 24 percent of other college students.¹² Elizabeth says:

Then there was the economic factor...I never realized the importance of money until I came to college...I worked every quarter at least 30 hours a week. Buying books was a real struggle for me. I hated the fact we had vacation time before the start of a new quarter. While for most people vacation meant a break, to me (because I worked on campus) it meant I did not work during that time and had to wait to save money for books. This meant

that I tended to buy my books a week or two after classes started.

Students also talked about feeling marginalized on campus because of their race and ethnicities.¹³ Rosanna says:

I noticed that the population (of students) was very different from what I had been accustomed to my entire life. Growing up I attended public schools that were diverse—minorities were the majority. Diversity wasn't

really something I thought about too often, until I got here. I noticed that here I was actually in the minority. I'll admit, it was kind of culture shock for me. I had never been in an environment where I was different. It was intimidating. I almost felt as though I couldn't be myself.

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In their essays, students relate different perspectives on the assumed role of affirmative action in the admissions process. A white first-generation student with financial need might perceive that students of

color have more options for financial aid. At the same time, students who belong to under-represented minority groups often have to deal with being one of the few minority students on campus. Vanessa says:

Although I used the fact that I was Mexican to my advantage in the application process, when I was accepted to colleges I wondered if the only reason I was chosen was because of my race. And if that was true, then I felt guilty, because I realized that I was more fortunate than most Latino people my age....I feel...as though I have to prove myself a little more than most people.

For minority students, marking their race can make them feel that they are using their race for their own personal advantage. But once in college they can sometimes feel responsible to do well—not only for themselves but also for their whole ethnic group—because they are “lucky” to have made it.

Adela, whose family immigrated to the United States from Romania when she was 11, writes about people's assumptions about her as white even though she felt she had more in common with students who were not white.

I am white or Caucasian and because of this I am assumed to be part of the majority, the privileged children attending this university. However, as a child I never felt that I could fit in with the white students. Although I, like them, had white skin, that pretty much is where our similarities

ended....I shared (more) with students whose families had recently immigrated from other cultures.

Elizabeth, who grew up in an urban environment, writes about her realization that even though she felt most comfortable around other Latino students at her school, she was also considered “different” from them:

Being first-generation was not the only obstacle I had....I was not readily accepted by the Latinos at my college. Many Latinos come from agricultural communities. I knew nothing of what their struggles were and how different Latinos from city-ghettoes are from Latinos from agricultural areas. All I had learned about Cesar Chavez was that he caused a strike that raised the prices of lettuce and grapes....I had to educate myself about the struggles of the people I thought were the most similar to me, yet I was so different from them and didn't share the same struggles. ...After all, my struggles had always involved gangs and how to avoid getting shot. They knew little about my struggles.

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Elizabeth also experienced racism on campus:

On top of this the greatest challenge of being Latina was associated with ignorant comments I heard or was told by non-Latinos. One evening I visited a friend in another residence hall....[one of the women on the floor] ‘complimented’ me by saying ‘Wow. You speak English very well. I can hardly notice your accent. When did you get here [to the U.S.]?’ I laughed, thinking she was joking, but I soon realized that she genuinely was impressed. I responded, ‘I was born here.’ She looked at me, confused. In class I was always the brown girl in the corner of my classrooms. As a political science major we often talked about propositions and I had the joy of being asked at least three times, ‘What do your people think?’ as if ‘my people’ were a whole different species or as if I was the representative for all Mexicans.

Although Phil grew up in all-white neighborhoods and attended schools with very few African-American students, at college he is even more conscious of being Black:

My adjustment has been difficult because of the small number of black students and faculty on campus. I thought because I grew up sur-

rounded by white people that I would be used to it, but it feels different. At least in Seattle after school I could hang out with my family or friends from other schools who were black. Now I am exposed to white people all of the time. No matter where I go, I'm usually the only black person around....the thought that I can go an entire day without seeing one black person bothers me.

Being black at this campus I have experienced the stereotypes that people have towards African Americans. When I meet someone new on

campus I am often asked, 'So, do you play any sports?' To most people this is an honest question, but after hearing it from half the people I meet, it gets old. It's worse when professors ask me. Unfortunately, whenever I talk to teachers on a personal level outside of class they always ask. They just assume that I'm an athlete for no other reason than the color of my skin. ...I already have to overcome the stigma that I am dumb because I am black. If they find out that I play sports then I have to overcome that as

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well. I know people question whether the only reason I go to college is because I am black and an athlete. It's just something that I've come to understand. I shouldn't have to tolerate these attitudes, but it's become part of life.

Unfortunately, to many people around me, I represent perhaps the only black person they will meet. My mother always wanted me to portray the right image because she didn't want me to fall into any of the typical black stereotypes. I have taken this attitude with me to college. I watch what I wear because I don't want people to think I'm too 'ghetto.' I watch how I talk because I want to sound educated. In many ways I feel the pressure of my race upon me. I cannot just be myself. I see this in nearly every black person I know. We're all concerned with image. Either African Americans are too afraid to not fit the stereotypical African American mold, or they try very hard (like myself) to prove the prejudices wrong. It is a very tiring way to live life.

Another obstacle that some first-generation college students face is overcoming inadequate high school educations. We have a number of Latino students who dream of becoming doctors. Programs that encourage youth to be involved in the natural sciences are being developed and promoted.¹⁴ But the attempt to interest students in postgraduate work in the sciences will be futile if they leave science majors as

undergraduates.

At our university, only about one-quarter of the Latino students who enroll as biology majors remain in the major by their junior year—compared with almost half of our European-American and Asian-American students. For many, the coursework is too difficult because their high schools have not prepared them well for the rigors of our science classes. We have to ask ourselves if we are perpetuating the inequalities that have already affected the lives of these students, through no fault of their own, and what we can do to make up for these past deficiencies.

Fewer first-generation college students graduate than do non-first generation students.¹⁵ Right after dropping his major in the natural sciences and thinking he would never become a doctor, William felt defeated:

I remember walking through campus knowing how much I loved being at this school yet questioning whether or not I belonged or was even wanted here. I began to internalize my professors' words and questioned my position at the University. I even questioned whether or not I should return the following year. I was doing well in my classes but the dreams I had were slowly crumbling...

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William has since graduated with a major in sociology and with the help of a biology and a sociology professor has been accepted to post-baccalaureate programs to prepare nonscience majors for medical school.

For Rosanna, balancing the multiple demands of school, work, and family, as well as feeling “different” from most of the other students at the university contributed to her doubts about staying:

I thought about transferring out—I thought about it often....Growing up I was able to juggle school responsibilities with family obligations, but college required so much more of me. I also felt obligated to work to offset the financial cost of school to my parents. My parents did not make me work, but I felt I should take some responsibility for my choice to attend an expensive school...(but as a result of all this) my grades suffered and as a result, my confidence plummeted.

As these quotations from the autobiographical writings of first-generation college students show, these students are affected by a number of different issues in their adjustment to college. Their stories allow other

students who read them to consider the many important factors that influenced the ability of these students to attend college, to recognize their privileges, and to rethink the interactions they have with their fellow classmates. For first-generation college students, these stories provide comforting assurance that they are not alone and that what they are experiencing is valid. For faculty, staff, and the administrators, the stories give rare insight into the lives and feelings of students, insights students often do not feel comfortable saying out loud.

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In the classroom, the stories open up discussions about race and social class and the potential feelings of roommates and classmates. As a faculty member using this volume of autobiographical writings, sharing the experiences of students forces me to make sure that I include course content that gives context to students' stories.¹⁶

On the campus, the collection of writings provides material that can be used in training new student orientation leaders, advisors, and those working in the residence halls. Because first-generation college students cut across race and gender, and sometimes social class, the collection has also helped to reopen discussions and thinking about redefining admissions criteria, financial aid, and the types of students we want to help educate.


Further, working with students to write their own autobiographies is a way for academics to make sure that voices generally not part of the academy, because they are not published, are in fact part of the curriculum.¹⁷

One such voice, Patty, says:

The effect of not having a voice can be a loss insurmountable to any other. To suppress someone's voice is to deny them the ability to express themselves....The power and significance of words, spoken and written, lies in their capacity to impact others' lives and in their capacity to reclaim the right to self-expression.

Considering the autobiographies of students also presents an opportunity to think explicitly about the values, contradictions, and thoughts we promote through our actions. For example, as instructors, when a student chooses a family event over turning in an assignment on time, and we lower the grade because of tardiness, what is the lesson we are trying to teach? Hopefully the ideals and values emphasized in non-college educated families are not being totally lost once their children graduate from college.¹⁸

Although universities were started to serve the needs of the upper class,¹⁹ in the 21st century, higher education is necessary for an increasing proportion of our population. College attendance has become one of the most used means of social mobility in the United States; it is a tool that can rectify past inequalities. While first-generation college students often struggle in college, once they graduate they have similar career possibilities and incomes as do students with familial college backgrounds.²⁰ First-generation college students can also be ambassadors to future generations of students. As Patty notes: “Being the first in my family to attend a four-year university is in one word, empowering. As a first-generation college student I am opening a door of opportunities not only for my family, but for other students as well.”

The entrance of current first-generation college students into our higher education systems and their subsequent success or failure is a measure of the quality and ability of our undergraduate institutions to adapt to changing student bodies. First-generation college students are the recent immigrants, students of all colors, those who speak many languages. They are the students we need as our future doctors, social workers, teachers, and professors. Autobiography provides a means to learn from our students about the limitations inherent in our educational systems—and about the ways our actions may unintentionally isolate them on campus—as well as about the opportunities available to contribute to their growth. 

ENDNOTES

- 1 First-generation college students are defined as those whose parents did not attend a four-year college or university.
- 2 Dews and Law 1995; Silver 2002.
- 3 Ingram 1979; King 1987; Maines 2001; McKinney 2002.
- 4 Ron Scapp quoted in a discussion with bell hooks in hooks 1994, 148.
- 5 Funding for this project came from an internal grant from Santa Clara University’s Center for Multicultural Learning, Building Partnerships for Diversity grant, which is funded in part by the James Irvine Foundation.
- 6 Pascarella et al. 1996.
- 7 U.S. Department of Education 1998.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 See Baltimore 1995 for a discussion of the role of two-year and four-year colleges in helping Hispanic students succeed. The author notes the importance of Hispanic students entering and graduating from four-year, selective universities (p. 73).
- 10 London 1989; Mitchell 1997; Terenzini et al. 1996.
- 11 U.S. Department of Education op. cit.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Kent 1996 discusses the ways that racism on college campuses affects student experiences and the need for transformative solutions to such problems.
- 14 Claudio 2001.
- 15 U.S. Department of Education op. cit.

- ¹⁶ Beyond sociology the volume is also being considered for use in classes in Spanish, education, English, theater, and psychology.
- ¹⁷ Peters 2002.
- ¹⁸ Christopher and Whitson 1999.
- ¹⁹ Silver 2002.
- ²⁰ U.S. Department of Education 2001.

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