

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

First-Generation:  
Navigating Capital & Mobility

By

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## **Abstract**

There are many elements that contribute to, or act as barriers to, a student's academic success. First-generation students face the unequal availability of information and other cultural capital that is crucial to applying to university, as well as the tools needed to successfully navigate undergraduate education. In this work I examine the different elements of cultural capital accumulation that have been shown to impact first-generation college students. I draw on concepts identified in the existing literature including social and cultural capital, institutional assistance, financial situations, and identity conception. I diverge from the existing research to focus on the unique challenges first-generation status itself, and its disconnect from academia, presents students. Drawing on 20 in-depth interviews with first-generation undergraduate students at the University of Chicago, I aim to recognize and document the often-unseen barriers to education, the differences and disparities in attaining academic achievements, and the lived experiences of first-generation students.

## **Introduction**

First-generation status, defined as students whose parents have not received bachelor's degrees or higher, is an emanating topic of interest in education research. First-generation students make up a large portion of the student population in America and nearly half of the first-generation student population comes from low-income backgrounds (RTI 2019). First-generation students have been found to graduate at a rate of 26%, with that proportion dropping to 11% for first-generation students from low-income backgrounds, in comparison with the rate of 55% for students whose

parents completed college, also called continuing-generation students (Richards 2020; RTI 2019; Renn 2022). Additionally, nearly 30% of the first-generation students population is 30 years old or older (Hamilton 2024). First-generation students have also been found to utilize career-planning, resume assistance, and mental health services less than their continuing-generation peers (RTI 2019; Billings & Young 2022).

Among the existing literature on first-generation students, there are popular areas of focus, including enrollment and retention rates of first-generation students at universities, financial aid factors, and disparities across racial/ethnic groups (Kuenzi & Jackson 2005; Wilbur & Roscigno 2016; Glass 2023; Delgado 2020; Kolluri 2020; Jack 2020). The topic of socioeconomic status is often implicitly considered when discussing first-generation experiences, to the point where low-income student experiences and first-generation student experiences are sometimes assumed to be nearly interchangeable (e.g. Van Galen 2023; Fry 2021). Despite the overrepresentation of low-income and working class students among the first-generation population, these terms and experiences are not interchangeable and are not mutually inclusive in their impacts on academic experiences. There are unique impacts of first-generation status on navigating and adjusting to higher education due to unfamiliarity with academic systems that are particular to first-generation status (Jack 2020).

Bourdieu's work on class and the concept of "cultural capital" has been deeply influential on researchers' understanding of the impacts of education on one's social status and movement. Cultural capital refers to the understanding, tools, and practices necessary to navigate certain systems, in this case the undergraduate institution (Kolluri 2020). The tools of cultural capital are often taught to students through family

relationships, high school mentorship, and as culturally valued features, such as good grades. Although there are numerous embodiments of cultural capital, which can be differently employed and valued in different settings, the forms of cultural capital often necessary for navigating academic institutions seem to be less transferable.

Additionally, these academic forms of capital are less easily identifiable and harder to learn (Jack 2020). In this study, I argue that there is a unique disadvantage to the lack of connection to cultural capital pertaining to academia, which is sometimes referred to as academic capital, present among those with first-generation status, and that this disconnect is distinct from the difficulties faced by low-income status.

In this thesis, I explore the following questions: How does a lack of cultural capital among students from low-income backgrounds impact the pursuit of academic achievements and academic experiences for first-generation students? How is the absence of comprehensive education on how to pursue higher education work to stratify academic achievement as a means of upward mobility among first-generation students? The intention of this study is to recognize and document the often-unseen barriers to education, the differences and disparities in attaining academic achievements, and the lived experiences of first-generation students. This topic draws attention to the experiences of students pursuing upward mobility through academic achievements, and the inequitable experiences in these pursuits.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Capital***

Pierre Bourdieu developed a foundational concept in sociology: his theory of "capital." Bourdieu's conception of "capital" refers to a societal currency a person can

possess or embody which can help determine, as well as move throughout, their position in society (1986). Bourdieu identifies three forms capital can take, the first being economic capital, which refers to the monetary resources a person has access to. The second form is social capital, which refers to the people and connections a person has. The final and somewhat more abstract form is cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, behaviors, and skills a person possesses that are culturally valued in their society (Bourdieu 1986). This final form of capital has presented abundant conversations and critiques, with scholarship being done on various sources and perceptions of capital and its accumulation. Bourdieu's notion holds a heavy focus on the family's role in cultural capital's accumulation, to the extent that external factors, like education, do little to change this allotment. This view has received criticism from later scholars, with research bringing to light other other facets and complexities to the concept of cultural capital, both in its sources and its weight, building on the theory beyond the reliance of just family (Carter 2003; Lareau 2002; Yosso 2005).

The notion of capital has gained notoriety among education and socioeconomic researchers for its insight into the impacts of education on a persons' cultural assets and social standing. For example, Lareau has investigated the class-based differences on childrearing practices in both Black and White families and found that class differences in at-home practices had a much larger impact than race did on advantages transmitted to children (2003). Similarly, Carter found the value placed on dominant and non-dominant forms of capital are different and therefore present different impacts when employed (2003). More recently, Yee examined the difference in engagement strategies as a form of cultural capital to demonstrate the difference in value, and therefore

effectiveness, certain capital has in academic institutions (2016). Overall, a large body of literature has been conducted which builds on Bourdieu's initial notion of cultural capital and finds that it is affected by a number of factors that impact both the accumulation and the valuing of such capital (Yosso 2005; Carter 2003; Lareau 2003; Yee 2016). Similarly to how class background and race have been found to impact student experiences (Richards 2020; Carter 2003; Lareau 2003), students accumulation of cultural capital acts as a manifestation and mediator of such differences as students pursue higher education (Yosso 2005; Carter 2003; Lareau 2003).

### ***First-Generation***

"First-generation" student status refers to students whose parents or guardians have not received a bachelor's degree. Among the recent literature regarding education mobility, the topic of first-generation students is one of the many subfocuses present (e.g. Rondini et al. 2020; Roscigno et al. 2023; Jack 2020). However, much of this research includes highly specific subfocuses that overlap with first-generation status, limiting the generalizability of certain findings. Such trends include a focus on Hispanic and Latinx student experiences (e.g. Kolluri 2020; Tichavakunda & Galan 2023; Delgado 2020), which is a population over-represented in first-generation demographics (RTI 2019), first-generation students' enrollment rates in comparison with retention and graduation rates (e.g. Davis 2010; Kuenzi & Jackson 2005), and the overlapping impacts of low-income and first-generation status (e.g. Jack 2020; Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Richards 2020). These topics provide important examinations of student experiences and the overlapping identities that are overrepresented in the

first-generation population, but can skew the recognition of the difficulties that are presented by first-generation status itself.

First-generation students face a unique set of challenges when acquiring and employing the tools necessary for navigating the academic spaces and expectations presented in undergraduate institutions (Beard et al. 2023). Research consistently finds stark differences in the educational and life outcomes of first-generation undergraduates, including prospective financial hardships and lower wealth accumulation; these findings can be better understood through the undervaluing of particular forms of capital often used among low-income and first-generation students (Fry 2021; Yee 2016; White & Canning 2023). First-generation and low-income students learn forms of capital from domains of everyday life such as work and family, but these forms of capital do not align with the institutional standards for evaluation or expectations necessary to navigate higher education, leaving students who are not connected to such institutions unprepared (Beard et al. 2023; Yee 2016; Carter 2003; Yosso 2005).

Cultural capital can be divided into dominant and non-dominant forms, where capital that may be acquired in everyday experiences, or among marginalized communities, is valued less than more dominant forms of capital (Carter 2003; Yosso 2005; Yee 2016). This variation in the value placed on certain capital is further discussed in Carter's work examining dominant and non-dominant cultural capital through the lens of critical race theory (2003). Drawing attention to the societal perception of who has cultural capital and whose cultural capital has value, this pattern can be seen among the cultural capital first-generation students possess and the way

such capital is devalued in the dominant perceptions of higher education institutions (Carter 2003; Kolluri 2020; Yee 2016).

Additionally, the navigating that marginalized communities have to practice when in institutions has been recognized as its own form of capital, referred to as "navigational capital" in Yosso's (2005) work. This reference to the skill communities of color possess in maneuvering within institutions which have not been accessible spaces for such them similarly encompasses the position first-generation students are in as they navigate higher education institutions (Yosso 2005).

The institutional expectations of universities, such as self-advocacy, relationships with professors, rigorous academics requirements, networking, and so on, are not easily identifiable or readily visible upon entering universities, leaving students who are not prepared with this capital feeling disoriented and inadequate (Kolluri 2020; Richards 2020; Billings & Young 2022). Both Richards' (2020) and White & Canning's (2023) works shine light on the interpretation and disposition first-generation students have towards relationships with figures of authority and help-seeking behaviors, and how they are different from those of middle class and continuing-generation students. Richards' finds that first-generation students' come from a disposition of intimidation with authority figures and that this deters students from pursuing help-seeking behaviors (2020). Conversely, continuing-generation students were not found to have this hesitancy towards authority figures and are therefore more likely to seek help and build personable relationships with teachers (2020). Because engagement with authority figures is necessary to utilize help-services, in order for first-generation students to utilize this skill in college they must internalize a view that these relationships are



desirable and beneficial (Richards 2020). This difference can serve to create a perceived divide in students' understandings of their role as student and their belonging in higher education.

This theme is present within the body of research surrounding first-generation students, notably discussing feelings of doubt and anxiety pertaining to the skills, knowledge, and ability first-generation students feel they possess, often referred to with the term "imposter phenomenon" or "imposter syndrome" (McCarthy et al. 2023). Imposter phenomenon can create feelings of inadequacy and masquerading among those experiencing it, which can result in anxiety, lack of confidence, and depression, which can lead to poorer academic performance. This has also been looked at as a way first-generation students can become "othered," and that the feelings of being "othered" on campus may further perpetuate "imposter syndrome," further presenting a barrier to feeling that they belong (McCarthy et al. 2023; Billings & Young 2022).

Overall, this research provides insight into the perceptions and difficulties first-generation students may face on the individual level when they start college. The valued cultural capital and new student engagement practices first-generation students may encounter upon entering college can leave them ill prepared for starting their academic journey. Similarly, feelings of other-ing and the perceptions students hold of their role on campus impact their actions as a student, such as avoiding help-seeking behaviors, and a misunderstanding of their belonging. The cultural capital of being a student, such as engaging with authority figures in a personable way, is a practice first-generation students need to learn to adapt to, as well as adopt.

### ***Socioeconomic Class***

Students from low-income and working class backgrounds are more likely to be first-generation students than middle and upper class students are, and low-income backgrounds are an overrepresented population in first-generation student demographics (RTI 2019). Low-income students are more likely to work part- and full-time positions while in school and be less academically engaged on the basis of study time, club membership, and help-service utilization, than continuing-generation students (Yee 2016, White et al. 2023). First-generation and working class students have also been found to suffer mental health related issues at higher rates than their more affluent and continuing-education peers, and also been found to seek help at lower rates than said peers (White et al. 2023; Billings & Young 2022; Osborne 2024).

In both Yee's (2016) and Carter's (2003) works, the socioeconomic background of students is the focus of their disconnect with the dominant cultural capital of academia. This disconnect in the forms of valued capital and an understanding of when to employ them is shown in Yee's work through the class-based differences in student's engagement tactics and their effectiveness (2016). This study shows that the tactics of students differ on the basis of socioeconomic standing, and that strategies of engagement used among low-income students are less socially valued and serve students' success less effectively in academic settings (Yee 2016). Carter's work, while also focusing on socioeconomic background, gives attention to the role of race in the devaluing of capital (2003). Posed as dominant and non-dominant capital, Carter provides insight into the way higher socioeconomic classes possess more status and power in cultural capital because the value placed on cultural capital is determined by the dominant group (2003).

Additionally, low-income students have been found to view certain necessary engagement practices for navigating school with discomfort, particularly talking with teachers, and which avoiding can cause academic difficulties (Yee 2016; White et al. 2023; Calarco 2011; Lareau 2002). First-generation and low-income students have been found to interpret the responsibility for success, such as good grades, as independently their responsibility and that troubles they face should be addressed by being stricter with themselves, rather than reaching out for help (Yee 2016). This belief was not found among middle class students, but rather they viewed reaching out for support as their responsibility and that professors were available and responsible to provide this help (Yee 2016). Low-income and first-generation students did not share this view of help-seeking behaviors or engagement with authority, demonstrating a form of student practice, or capital, they do not possess (Yee 2016).

This pattern in the different views and actions towards help-seeking behaviors was also found to be present along socioeconomic class-lines in elementary school students in Calarco's (2011) research. Calarco found that while low-income and working-class students tend to wait to be assisted, middle class students call out to teachers for help directly and therefore spend less time waiting for assistance (2011). This finding demonstrates that different strategies provide middle class students with advantages in the classroom. Similarly, in Lareau's work, differences in at-home childrearing practices among low-income and working-class families provided children less privilege and advantages than the strategies of middle class households (2002).

***Intersection***

First-generation low-income students were found to be nearly four times more likely to leave higher education by the end of their first year than their higher-income, continuing-generation peers (Beard et al. 2023). Another study found that there is a difference in the level of difficulty in the transition and navigation upon entering college between continuing-generation low-income students and first-generation students, which helps demonstrate the impact that exposure to academic expectation has on students' preparedness (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013). As students rely on parental knowledge and tools to navigate institutions, parents have a unique ability to provide knowledge and guidance for continuing-generation students that is unavailable to first-generation students (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Glass 2023).

Academic decisions are highly impacted by factors like family, school, and community (Glass 2023). In addition to the families' view of college and its potential benefits, first-generation and low-income students also have to receive college advice from unconventional resources, such as mentoring programs (Glass 2023; Beard et al. 2023). Armstrong and Hamilton's (2013) research shows that additional difficulties in what they refer to as the "mobility pathways" of first-generation low-income students include financial hardship, as well as difficulty connecting with other students. Armstrong and Hamilton find that the difficulty connecting socially on the basis of class and first-generation status, can act to disconnect these students from potential allies in their more affluent peers (2013). Moreso, because first-generation and low-income students also lacked certain cultural knowledge about academia they faced difficulties

that could've been avoided, such as potential courses you can opt out of or scholarships you could apply to instead of working (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013).

Research consistently shows the significant impacts early investment in academics has on the academic pathways of first-generation and low-income students, as well as the potential domino effect early investment in academic resources — or withholding of such resources — can have on students' academic outcomes (Armstrong & Hamilton 2013; Jack 2020; Beard et al. 2023). These early investment efforts into students' academic careers include high school programming, college bridge and pre-orientation programs, which have been shown to affect the rates of college enrollment among students, as well as their feelings of preparedness (Glass 2023; Beart et al. 2023).

Overall, the intersecting, and often overlapping, elements of first-generation status and of other marginalized identities, such as low-income status, demonstrate the ways in which the cultural capital can play a vital role in students' academic lives. Much of the literature here provides insight into the disadvantages placed on marginalized communities in the valuing of certain capital, and devaluing of others. The devaluing of capital possessed by low-income and working class communities mirror the dominant and non-dominant culture and affluence of social class at large (Carter 2003). These patterns are applicable to first-generation students in similar ways, with their disconnect from the capital that is specifically valued in academic settings leaving them disconnected from navigating academic institutions.

## **Research Design & Methods**

### ***Research Positionality***

When I was in high school, college wasn't something I ever considered. I assumed I would graduate and work at a fast food chain down the street and take care of my family. My parents didn't attend college, and neither did my grandparents, so I assumed college wasn't an opportunity for someone like me — someone who grew up very poor. I didn't know how the application process worked, or what universities were "looking for," and I didn't have the connections to ask. I was lost and I was scared, and when I happened to meet a mentor who offered to help me, I jumped at the opportunity — for myself, and so that when the day came, I would be able to help my younger brother apply.

Despite my academic record and my presence at this university, only a few years ago I had discredited higher education as an option because I didn't understand the systems and did not have connections to those who did. I lacked the cultural capital to pursue it, and a subconscious awareness of this removed the idea from my consideration. This type of self-discrediting and self-fulfilling prophecy are part of the inspiration for this research project — to help document and address the experiences of first-generation students as they make the choice to pursue higher education and the way this identity impacts their experience.

### ***Aims and Design***

The intention of this study is to document the struggles and difficulties first-generation students face, and further to document the various facets of first-generation identity. I view first-generation status as a function of socioeconomic status, which has implications for social mobility and stratification. Such implications, while understanding why a student might be a first-generation, include stratification of

academic opportunities and of upward social mobility, the reproduction of socioeconomic status, and the challenge completing a degree program while facing economic hardships is.

First-generation identity often overlaps with low-income and working-class identities, and these factors will be reviewed in this work. Additional factors of first-generation status examined in this work include difficulties in upward social mobility, potential limitations in cultural capital surrounding academia, and the additional hardships potentially present due to this status.

This study takes the stance that first-generation students come from a disconnected position, across socioeconomic backgrounds; in order to understand the impacts of this academic disconnect, it is important to understand students' high school-to-college transition and college application experience. I utilize an asset-based framework (Green & Haines 2016), which assumes that the research population possesses valuable insights into the needs and skill sets of the community. Additionally, this framework prioritizes the autonomy of the group in the process of research (Green & Haines, 2016).

The population for this study included first-generation undergraduate students currently enrolled, or recently graduated since 2022, from the University of Chicago. Respondents were required to have been raised in the United States to establish a specific understanding of the American first-generation experience. No particular degree program was targeted, nor was a specific age range set. Participant recruitment methods included printed flyers posted around the university campus, digital flyers shared through email marketing, and word-of-mouth snowball sampling.

In total, the study included 20 respondents, with 15 respondents recruited from flier sign-ups, and 5 from snowball outreach. The demographic makeup of respondents was 36.36% male and 63.63% female; none clarified a gender identity outside of this binary. Respondents were majority non-White, although specific racial/ethnic identity was not collected. Using flier and email-based recruitment methods, I had difficulty finding respondents due to the transition into summer break and the move of students to off campus housing. In total, the non-response rate accumulated after contacting, and following up with, each student that showed interest was 42.85%.

To provide a more holistic understanding of this complex topic, semi-structured in-depth interviews were used to collect data. Employing an asset-based framework, which prioritizes the autonomy and knowledge possessed by the group being researched, I felt it was important to speak with the population beyond the limited nature of surveys. I conducted interviews on a one-on-one basis, which included in-person and virtual Zoom interviews. 17 interviews were done virtually through the Zoom program, and 3 were conducted in-person at the University's Regenstein Library study rooms to ensure privacy and focus, while maintaining respondent comfort by using a public and familiar space. Additionally, respondents' participation was kept confidential and anonymous to help them feel more comfortable being open about their experiences without risk of potential retaliation.

Topics of analysis for this study include application process experience, self-identification, the use of formal and informal supports, feelings surrounding academia, and goal achievement. Each interview was audio recorded, and followed up with transcription and thematic coding of respondents' answers. Nearly 20 hours of



interviews were conducted, which was followed by thorough review. I followed up interviews by listening to each interview's recording at least 3 times throughout the coding process, in addition to reading over each transcription. I modeled my coding process after the techniques expressed by Johnny Saldaña in his work on qualitative methods (2021). The initial listen focused on transcribing respondents' words and recording field notes from the interview setting and notable behaviors of the respondent, which falls under Saldaña's descriptive coding method to gather the context of your data collection (2021). The second listen of recordings focused on codifying respondents' answers, creating preliminary codes of respondents' answers and then further lump coding the sentiments expressed, which Saldaña classifies as a type of holistic coding method to gain an overview of your data's point (2021). The holistic coding method helped me to proceed to group together the sentiments being expressed. The third listen was focused on second-cycle coding that compiled recurring themes respondents were sharing and which were repeatedly expressed by multiple respondents. This third listen I also focused on finding the words of respondents I felt effectively expressed these themes.

I focus on the application processes and experiences while in school. My analytical focus is elements of cultural capital, specifically in correlation to its necessity and deficiency, as well as cultural belonging and exclusion within the institution, and perceptions of unknown knowledge. The perception of unknown knowledge includes respondents' feelings of preparedness and their confidence in the knowability of the components necessary for college applications, as well as navigating student expectations once in college. Additionally, interviews offered insight into individuals'

sources of knowledge, as well as their feelings about how these systems operate and navigation of them.

### **Context**

Although scholarship recipients were not targeted for participant recruitment, 16 of the 20 respondents in this study are Questbridge recipients. Questbridge is an American nonprofit which provides select students with full scholarships to some of the most elite universities in the U.S. Employing what is called a college match system, universities that partner with the Questbridge are available to be selected by students into a tiered list to apply to and using the match system, universities review students' applications and has the option to admit students, committing them to their school with a full scholarship. Students must apply to the Questbridge program itself, which requires that a student's family makes less than \$65,000 a year — which is below the U.S. median poverty line — and agree to attend college immediately after high school, as well as U.S. citizenship and being a top achieving student at their high school (Questbridge 2024). Questbridge also covers application fees for each university. In addition to this financial opportunity, Questbridge also provides high school workshops and events, alumni mentorship, and application guidance. Although availability of these resources vary for respondents, overall the Questbridge programs provide a number of resources for admitted students.

### **Findings**

Among participants in this study, first-generation status is shown to be challenging, stressful, and — as identified by respondents — isolating. Respondents demonstrated a feeling of responsibility and weight regarding the pursuit of academia,

which may be unique to first-generation status. The reports of respondents on their experiences both in the application process, as well as adjusting to being in undergraduate, reveal feelings of confusion and an awareness that there is knowledge that they do not possess — indicating an understanding that they start from a place where they do not possess the cultural capital needed to navigate academia.

### ***Application Process***

In discussing the college application process, there was a recurrent theme of stress. Stress can be expected for any student facing a large deadline and important decision beyond their control (Bauer-Wolf 2023) — but the specific basis of this stress had more to do with learning about what the applications required, completing the steps correctly, and the larger implications of not getting into college.

Students diverged into two trends when asked when they first started thinking about applying to college: Extremely early prep, and delayed consideration. The former trend refers to the students who felt so anxious about the pursuit of undergraduate study that they reported first thinking about and preparing for college applications in middle school. Respondents reported the reasoning for such early prep as anxiety, as well as different family expectations, and for some, responsibility, to go to college. One respondent, a 20 year old female student, went so far as to say "My family very much emphasized that I would be the one that would, like, bring them out of poverty so it was very important for me to go to college." Another respondent, also a 20 year old, said in reference to her parents' attitude surrounding higher education: "They came here to be successful, so you have to be successful or we came here for nothing." Another

respondent, an 18 year old woman, stated that the intense anxiety she felt about college had her thinking about and planning for it in middle school:

"I felt very anxious. That's why I started thinking about it since middle school, because I didn't know what it was. Honestly, my perception was through, like Gilmore Girls. Like I remember [her] applying to like Harvard and having to like be like a perfect student. So I just kind of like internalized that. I was like, *Okay, I don't know what colleges want. I don't know the application process*, and, like honestly, my parents were not like there. They just couldn't help. It's not that they weren't helpful, they couldn't help. So I was just like, Okay, I need to be the best person possible. I need to get the best grade. And I need to do all these activities like, I need to be drowning in activities so I stand out. And yeah, that's kind of how I felt - I felt like ambitious, but I also felt very anxious in that, like the ambition was driven by the anxiety I guess."

The latter trend covers the respondents that reported they first started thinking about pursuing undergraduate studies, and starting all the necessary application preparation, within the last two years of high school. For these students, college was something they did not seem to contemplate as an option for themselves; they seemed not to consider the potential importance, or hindrance, of the decision about whether to attend college. One respondent, a 20 year old man, reported that despite going to a private school, his low-income background and the various struggles his family faced left him without the understanding of the high school preparation needed and its impacts on whether he could get into college.

"I started figuring out like, like end of junior going to senior year, I started figuring out I need to apply to college. And I remember like when I took the SAT or the PSAT in school, I never understood why my friends around me

were so hyper neurotic about it. I went to private school so like everyone around me was very high class and their parents understood the importance of taking the SAT and PSAT. Whereas I didn't."

When discussing the pursuit of college, the overwhelming sentiment was that of uneasiness and anxiety. Respondents shared that they wished their parents were able to help guide them through the application process but they simply couldn't, which is a major difference respondents reported feeling in comparison with continuing-generation students. One described it as "having to be self-sufficient," while other students on campus could talk with their parents and receive guidance about applications, internships, and being in college. One respondent, an 18 year old woman, shared that not having this resource felt stressful, stating "it's a human thing to like want to be taken care of sometimes, but I can't do that in a lot of aspects [pertaining to college and application prep]." Overall, respondents' feelings towards the college application process was that of unsurety and ill preparedness, even among students who prepare ahead. The stressful experience of the application process was one respondents felt alone in, with family and high schools seeming hollow resources, and that whatever colleges were "looking for" was something they didn't know how to be sure of.

Another recurring theme among students' attitudes surrounding the application process was a type of discrediting of their perception of their own abilities, with one respondent saying "I feel like it's always a concept of trying to be one step ahead, trying to constantly figure out the next steps before I get there." Another respondent referred to the application process as a constant process of "catch up." This theme aligns with the imposter phenomena present in the findings of McCarthy et al. (2023), showing that

even while preparing to enter college students are facing issues with their perceptions of themselves as students.

### ***Experiences & Adjustment***

*"I think that like, as first gen, you kind of just find mentors within each other."* – [21 year old, female]

Respondents were asked about the summer before they entered college, as well as about any mentorship and assistance they may have received during this transitional period from the end of high school to college. No respondents reported gap periods between high school and their degree programs. An important factor to note is that all participants in this study received full tuition scholarships. Although this was not a characteristic intentionally sought out, due to the low-income background of many first-generation students, as well as their first-generation status itself, many respondents were eligible under the University of Chicago scholarship criteria for the Odyssey Scholarship (a program based on financial and family background). Additionally, a majority of respondents were a part of the QuestBridge program which is specifically targeted towards high-achieving low-income, first-generation students.

When asked about the adjustment to college, respondents often stated that the first year was very hard, that they felt alone and very stressed — with one respondent, a 21 year old female, going so far as to say they were "just trying to survive." This difficulty in adjustment is touched on in Beard et al.'s (2023) by way of discussing the impact pre-orientation programs can have on the adjustment of first-generation students into undergraduate life, as well as the impacts participation in pre-orientation programs can have on building student networks for support. Response of this study expressed

that their biggest support while in school was their fellow student friends. Additionally, because all respondents were recipients of either the Questbridge scholarship or the Odyssey scholarship, many were eligible for University of Chicago's first-generation and low-income pre-orientation programs and it is at this program that many respondents reported they found their friendship network.

Students expressed that the first year of college was the worst in terms of adjusting to being in college and the academic expectations that come with navigating it. One respondent, a 20 year old woman, expressed this by saying that the first year of undergraduate "aged [her] 5 years," which adds understanding to the finding that first-generation students are nearly four times more likely to leave higher education by the end of their first year than higher-income continuing-generation students (Beard et al. 2023; RTI 2019). A unique element of the isolation respondents felt was that the campus around them, both in regard to faculty and classmates, did not understand the context of first-generation status. One respondent shared "I think a lot of the assistance comes when you're like transitioning from like, the summer before college to like that first quarter, but after that you're kind of just on your own...you learn where not to go before you learn where to go." This sentiment engages with a disconnect many first-generation students feel with authority figures and that their misunderstanding of this status deters students from seeking support (White & Canning 2023; Richards 2020).

In a similar regard, respondents also reported feeling separated from their family back home because they did not understand the difficulties of being a college student and the lifelong career choices students were making. One respondent expressed this

sentiment and the additional parental pressure she felt, stating "because you're doing it for the first time and they're experiencing the process for the first time, and they have expectations of you," referring to the sacrifices her parents made in order for her to have high-quality education opportunities. Respondents additionally shared that due to the prestigious nature of the University of Chicago, their friends who were also entering college did not understand the extent of difficulty they were experiencing during applications and since starting their program. Some respondents shared that their friends or siblings back home also do not understand the difficulty because many stayed in-state, went to community or state colleges which have less intensive application processes, and were able to stay with the support networks at home. One respondent, a recently graduated woman, shared that friends back home "just don't get it."

In a similar vein, one respondent explained that she felt some first-generation students, like herself, focus all their attention on college admittance, but once they start they feel lost as to what's next:

"I feel like students like me, who like put all their effort into just getting into the school by like a horses' hair, once they get in, they're kind of like, they have like a second to breathe and like, *wow, like, I did it right*. But like, you're kind of in this position where like, you're like, sort of like a jack of all trades, just by the fact like you are first-generation. A first-generation student who likes doesn't necessarily know what they want to do, because what you wanted to do for so long was just like, studying [to] get into college. So like, now that you did that, like what's next? So I think that was like the big wake up call for college."

Another theme among respondents is feelings of confusion and discomfort with the often utilized element of networking. The University of Chicago boasts its network of



alums and scholars as a resource for networking and connection, but respondents of this study felt confused and uncomfortable with the idea of reaching out for the intention of help. One respondent, a 20 year old woman, shared:

"The whole culture of like, networking, and like being friends with someone and like, because like I feel like just like culturally, like from my class, but also culturally, like from my actual background culture, it's like, kind of inappropriate to like get to know someone just for like an ulterior motive of like, *Oh, can you write me this letter of recommendation, or oh, can like you, like, squeeze me into this job* or like, stuff like that. And it's like, that's a culture that's like, it's a skill you have to have, in terms of like securing a summer internship, because that's like a big thing."

Overall, the experiences of respondents when entering college, and the perceptions of their adjustment and place on campus, respondents felt disconnected, alone, and out of place. In very tangible ways respondents lacked access to certain resources to help them, even with the unusual availability of Questbridge's programming. The relationships students built with each other is something respondents feel is a major support while in school, but this connection is limited to fellow first-generation and low-income students. As students adjust to undergraduate, they are aware of, and feel the impacts and anxiety of, their disconnection with the forms of academically valued cultural capital.

### ***Perceptions***

When talking with respondents about their perceptions of the first-generation label, most respondents expressed a type of bittersweet feeling around this identity, although they felt it validated the amount of work they had completed in order to be

where they are today — as one respondent put it, "I feel empowered by it because I know I put in so much hard work, like I've not nepo-babied my way through life in a lot of things."

Many students noted that there is a strong class factor in the first-generation experience, as well as an interesting disparity amongst even those who may also identify as a first-generation student. It is important to note that first-generation status and low-income background are two independent factors in student experiences, but first-generation students are often low-income students as well. Many respondents in this study also identified as coming from low-income and/or working class backgrounds, and many noted that difficulties they identified as being part of the first-generation experiences overlap with, or are rooted in, low-income experiences. One respondent, a 20 year old woman, identified low-income status as a "lack of access — in general." Overall, all but one respondent did feel that first-generation status does specifically affect their student experience negatively. The one exception to this was one respondent, a 20 year old male, who felt that socioeconomic background had more impact than first-generation status.

When encountering other first-generation students, some respondents noted that it can be surprising when some students do not share certain experiences or express beliefs that stem from not being low-income, indicating that they may be a first-generation student from a middle or upper class background. Some respondents shared surprise when they encountered first-generation students from a more affluent background or who are White, expressing that because of their own background they assume that the first-generation experience is an inherently colored experience. One

respondent shared "I had this very naive perception when I was a kid that everyone who's a person of color, or everyone who's Muslim is also poor...I'll meet someone here and they'll be like, *Yeah, I'm first generation*, but like, all first generation folk aren't kinfolk." These feelings could correspond with the finding from the National Center for Education Statistics that roughly 10% of first-generation students are also first generation Americans (Hamilton 2024).

When it came to inquiring about respondents' feelings of preparedness for college applications and completing all that is necessary for those, including completing forms and collecting the proper materials, a major factor in respondents' feelings of preparation had to do with the extracurricular support they had access to. A majority of respondents for this study received additional highschool programming about the college application process. Additionally, many were in the Questbridge program which provided additional mentoring and application resources, which helped students feel prepared. For respondents without these networks of support, which made up less than a quarter of the respondent pool, they reported feeling unprepared and stressed about applications.

Overall, students shared that their view of college and the goal of obtaining a degree was ultimately to have a better life, socioeconomically, than their families. Although these sentiments were shared by all respondents about hoping to be able to get a good job, there was a varied degree of cultural value and prestige also expressed. As one respondent put it "I always viewed college as a vehicle for success, like successful people go to college;" another stated that she feels she must take advantage

of as many programs that there are because I don't know if I'll have the opportunity again." Another respondents worded it in terms of opening doors:

"I kind of saw something I had to do if I wanted to make it somewhere in life. Like to get a good paying job to get like you know some stability. You have to go to college to like open up opportunities. Especially at a private institution like UChicago, or schools like this. They're like opportunities to study abroad, just like taking different classes. Just expand your horizon. So that was my viewpoint."

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study seem to suggest that the disadvantages of first-generation student status mirror the documented disadvantages of other marginalized identities such as socioeconomic status. These findings additionally suggest, and confirm, that there is a unique disadvantage to first-generation status in navigating academia, by way of lacking the connection to and cultural capital valued within academic institutions. This is also notably different from the disadvantages of low-income and working class students, whose identities often overlap, but as noted by many respondents, is a different difficulty in academic pursuits.

The experiences of first-generation students expressed by respondents recognized a type of disconnect in their academic capital which produced anxiety among respondents. Although the participants of this study did not have the vocabulary to articulate that they felt their cultural capital they possessed was not being valued, the sentiments they expressed and stories they shared expressed a recognition that there was some sort of knowledge and practices they did not know and that it was harming their academic experience. Similarly, the need and desire for help does not negate the

anxiety and discomfort with authority for many respondents. Additionally, the view expressed by many respondents about first-generation status revealed an assumption of negative impacts, recognizing that this status is disconnected from the cultural capital necessary to navigate academia comfortably and successfully.

### ***Limitations***

The limitations of this study include those usual to the short duration allotted to education thesis research, as well as limitations inherent in any qualitative research project. Respondent demographics can not be assumed representative, with the respondent pool leaning female, as well as predominantly Hispanic, Latinx, and Black. Additionally, the financial situation of this study's respondents is unusual by nature of every participant being a recipient of a full scholarship, and this could potentially bias findings in that they do not experience the same financial hardships of many other first-generation students. Potential bias in this study is no greater than that posed in all qualitative research.

While attempting to complete this research multiple roadblocks presented themselves. Within the institution, there are very few scholars studying educational mobility, none of which are examining this topic at the university level, nor are they examining first-generation status. This absence created difficulty in finding assistance or establishing a foreground of research to review. During the initial submission of my research proposal for Institutional Review Board approval, the choice was made to send my project to the Office of Provost for additional approval, which is out of the norm for student research procedure, and created further delays in starting data collection.

Despite the presence of multiple campus organizations designated to help students of marginalized identities and first-generation, low-income, and immigrant statuses (FLI) specifically, including the Questbridge Network, Quest+, the Center for College Student Success, the Center for Identity and Inclusion, and Student Success Services, I had great difficulty connecting with the first-generation assistance services and community on campus. There were some external factors that contributed to the disconnecting, including the graduating of nearly all Student Success Service staff, but overall I found the campus services to be dismissive in relation to connecting with this project, as well as with me as a first-generation student myself.

An additional incident that seemed to reveal the campus climate towards first-generation students was the vandalism of recruitment fliers. Recruitment fliers briefly introduced the research goal and were posted across campus on designated flier boards. It was later noted that in some buildings, particularly Harper Hall and the Reynolds Club which are more popular spots across the student body, fliers had been ripped down.

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