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First Gens Unite

The New York Times. (Apr. 12, 2015) Lexile Measure: 1250L.

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From *Opposing Viewpoints In Context*.

Full Text:

CORRECTION APPENDED Ana Barros grew up in a two-family house built by Habitat for Humanity, hard by the boarded-up buildings and vacant lots of Newark. Neither parent attended college, but she was a star student. With a 2200 on her SATs, she expected to fit in at Harvard.

Yet here she was at a lecture for a sociology course called, paradoxically, "Poverty in America," as a classmate opened her laptop and planned a multicountry spring break trip to Europe. (Ms. Barros can't afford textbooks; she borrows from the library.) On the sidewalks of Cambridge, students brush past her in their \$700 Canada Goose parkas and \$1,000 Moncler puffer jackets. (Ms. Barros saved up for two years for good boots.) On an elite campus, income inequality can be in your face.

A professor once described how hardships become inscribed on one's body, and Ms. Barros thought of her father, a janitor at a home for troubled boys, and the wrinkles carved in his face from worrying about money and her mother's health. Majoring in sociology, she says, "has made me hyperaware of class differences here."

Weary of trying to pass as middle class, Ms. Barros decided to "come out," borrowing the phrase from the gay community. She joined and now leads the two-year-old Harvard College First Generation Student Union, which has 300 on its email list. "This is a movement," she said. "We are not ashamed of taking on this identity."

On the nation's most prestigious campuses, first-generation-in-college students like Ms. Barros are organizing, speaking up about who they are and what's needed to make their path to a degree less fraught. There's the Hidden Minority Council at Princeton and the First-Generation Low-Income Partnership at Yale and Columbia. Lynda Lopez started the Socioeconomic Diversity Alliance after a Facebook page she created, "UChicago Class Confessions," filled with frank exchanges within minutes.

And in February, IvyG, a student group formed last spring at Brown, hosted the first Inter-Ivy First Generation Student Network Conference. Some 250 students came to the snowbound Rhode Island campus from as far away as Stanford and Pomona College. The conference had the feel of a giddy meet-up for people unaccustomed to seeing others like them. They crashed on dorm room floors and wore cherry red conference T-shirts. Speakers included the president of Brown, a founder of the nonprofit QuestBridge, and the executive director of Michelle Obama's Reach Higher college campaign. Teach for America, the investment firm Bridgewater Associates and Google were sponsors.

Over three days, the conference unfolded as part edification (students left a talk on socioeconomics cheering "It's not our fault!"), part sharing and part empowerment. Participants traced obstacles, from juggling multiple jobs to frustrations when parents disapproved of majors they didn't understand.

Rudy Torres, a Brown junior from East Los Angeles, told of arriving at a welcome reception for admitted students at a Beverly Hills mansion only to have the host greet his father, a high school dropout, with a question: "Where did you go to undergrad?" The guests were white and the waiters, like his family, Mexican. "It was very uncomfortable," he said.

The conference offered mostly an upbeat take on the first-gen identity, a new message for many. Hung Pham, who graduates from Yale in May with a B.A. in art history, attended a session on casting adversity on your rsum as a skill-building asset. He declared it "shocking."

"It's always been about focusing on deficits," he said. "How can I be better? How can I catch up?" In his first art history class, the professor had gone around class asking each student to name a favorite Renaissance painter. He hadn't had any.

The bright children of janitors and nail salon workers, bus drivers and fast-food cooks may not have grown up with the edifying vacations, museum excursions, daily doses of NPR and prep schools that groom Ivy applicants, but they are coveted candidates for elite campuses.

As the nation's racial and ethnic makeup has grown more mixed and socioeconomically varied, "first gen" has become a way to identify and talk about class diversity. The incentive for top colleges is obvious: Leaders come from these schools' ranks. It matters that campuses reflect the nation, said Rakesh Khurana, dean of Harvard College. "We see our obligation as preparing citizens and citizen leaders."

First-gen students cut across racial and ethnic lines. Not all are poor, but many are, including a majority of those at elite colleges. According to the Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, median family income is \$37,565 for freshmen whose parents did not attend college and \$99,635 for those whose parents did. The economic gap is even starker at Ivies. More than half of Harvard's freshman class come from families making over \$125,000 a year, including 15 percent with incomes between \$250,000 and \$500,000 and another 14 percent

over \$500,000. Many of the 15 percent who are first-generation freshmen earn under \$40,000, said William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid.

The first-gen label is slippery, though: Some federal programs, the Common Application and many Ivies, including Harvard and Brown, apply the term when parents don't have a bachelor's degree. Many others, including the National Center for Education Statistics, often identify first-generation students as those whose parents have no college experience.

Of the 7.3 million full-time undergraduates attending four-year public and private nonprofit institutions, about 20 percent are the first in their families to go to college. While the number has ticked up as college-going has increased over all, the proportion has actually declined from 40 years ago, when 38 percent were first generation, according to the annual U.C.L.A. survey.

Thomas G. Mortenson, senior scholar at the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education, says that the rising cost of attendance, the shift in federal aid from grants to loans and tax credits, and the drive by public universities to attract more full-paying students has put full-time attendance out of reach. Many attend part time or enroll at two-year or for-profit colleges.

"They are concentrated in community colleges because that's what they can afford," Dr. Mortenson said.

The paucity of low-income students at selective colleges has long been problematic. Research by the Stanford economist Caroline M. Hoxby shows that most high-achieving low-income students continue to "under-match." Without guidance from knowing parents and unaware that a well-endowed private college can be the most affordable option, qualified first-gen applicants often don't consider appropriately rigorous colleges.

The proportion of freshmen at elite campuses who are first generation -- 11 percent at Dartmouth, 12 percent at Princeton, 14 percent at Yale, 15 percent at Amherst, 16 percent at Cornell, 17 percent at Brown -- nearly matches that of their low-income Pell grant recipients. Washington University in St. Louis, the least economically diverse top school, in January vowed to increase freshman enrollment of Pell recipients from 8 percent to 13 percent by 2020.

Admissions offices have made efforts to find these students. Data compiled for the IvyG conference by Dr. Mortenson shows that from 2000 to 2013, Amherst, Harvard, Brown and Princeton doubled or almost doubled Pell recipients. Yale's growth was modest, while Cornell numbers declined slightly.

Mr. Fitzsimmons of Harvard is himself a first gen; his parents owned a gas station and variety store. He said that in the past three years Harvard had made a "special" effort, putting the label into pitches to reach so-called one-offs -- students not part of a pipeline program or known high school. Harvard's redesigned website has a first-gen information section. They ask current first-gen students to contact others from their high schools.

Despite efforts, the percentage doesn't budge much, and Mr. Fitzsimmons expects it will take a generation before hard-to-reach students consider Harvard in substantial numbers. "We have a long slog ahead of us."

What happens when students from undereducated families matriculate at the biggest brand names in higher education? It's complicated.

The very point of enrolling at elite schools, of course, is to absorb the power and privilege that come with the degree. That's harder for some than others, notes Anthony Abraham Jack, a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at Harvard who studies low-income students and their paths to college.

"Academically, all these students can do the work," he said. "The question becomes, 'When do social hurdles get in the way?'"

In his research, Mr. Jack describes two types of first-generation students: the "privileged poor" and the "doubly disadvantaged." The privileged poor attend private high schools or precollege programs like Prep for Prep and A Better Chance, which ready them, he says, for the culture shock of a wealthy campus and give them practice interacting with adults. The doubly disadvantaged, he says, "stay in local, typically distressed and segregated high schools."

Mr. Jack has lived his research. A bear of a man, he grew up in Miami in a single-parent household that relied on food stamps. He wears, almost always, a gold chain with a large ruby-embellished horseshoe as a reminder, he says, of his father, who bought the bling instead of family essentials -- he had borrowed it for his senior-year picture, and kept it.

Although he did not attend a private school until his senior year, "in that one year, wow, things happened."

"I met people who were international," he said. "I started eating my burgers medium because that's how they ate them." (He had never been to a restaurant that offered a choice of how your burger was cooked.)

At school, he learned the meaning of the term "office hours" -- that his presence was an expectation, not an imposition. When he arrived at Amherst, from which he graduated in 2007, he understood the importance of getting to know professors. "Being at ease with individuals in positions of authority, especially those who act as gatekeepers to resources or jobs, is often just as important as the skills and knowledge students bring to the job market upon graduation," he said.

Mr. Jack's office in Mather House has shelves of books, J.M.W. Turner landscape prints -- he saw the real paintings when he went abroad for the first time, to London in 2011 -- and two bottles of a 2008 Barolo he intends to drink upon his graduation next spring, one with his adviser, William Julius Wilson.

One of the hard things about being a low-income student, Mr. Jack said, is the breezy talk that unfolds when students describe "going to Martha's

Vineyard or the Hamptons because that's where someone's graduation party was." Or when they recount vacations and travel. That makes spring break difficult, which is why he considers it a victory that, after being pressed, administrators kept two dining halls open last month, for the first time, in recognition that not all students can leave.

Administrators are still figuring out how to help.

Public four-year colleges and universities educate large numbers of first-generation students (1.7 million versus 623,000 at private nonprofits), though their graduation track records are mixed. Some, like the University of Kentucky and the University of Cincinnati, offer residence halls with special programming.

Elites are trying to catch up. Campuses have designated first-gen administrators, bolstered mentoring programs and added articles about socioeconomics to faculty readings on diversity. Some are careful in assigning roommates. "In a double, we would not put a student not on aid with a student on full aid," said Thomas Dingman, dean of freshmen at Harvard.

A fund was set up four years ago at Georgetown to cover classroom clickers, winter coats and, when dining halls are closed, grocery money. Low-income freshmen get bedding as a welcome gift (not a handout), said Melissa Foy, director of the Georgetown Scholarship Program, which oversees the fund. "Messaging is everything." The program crafted a "Survival Guide" (how to access financial aid refunds, cheapest days for air travel), a "Cheat Sheet" for parents (what is a midterm?), and airport pickup and move-in help for those arriving alone. During a special orientation, freshmen rehearse conversations with roommates about chipping in for dorm furnishings.

In January, Harvard named its first first-generation tutor. Jason B. Munster, who will be a sounding board on academic and social matters for first-gen students in Mather House, grew up in a part of Maine so rural it was called simply "unorganized territory #60." He graduated from Harvard in 2007 and, following a stint in finance, is now a graduate student in engineering. "Most people didn't know I was first gen until recently," he said. "If you see someone who is at Harvard who is white, you assume their parents went to college, especially someone blond-haired, blue-eyed and plays a sport like rugby."

Mr. Munster, who was near the top of his high school class, was stunned that most of his first-year classes were entry level. "Everyone at Harvard takes Expos 20," he said. "I took Expos 10." He quickly dropped an economics lecture with 200 students because "the class was just huge and I was too nervous to raise my hand." When he went for help during the professor's office hours, others "were jumping in front of you because they had to advocate for themselves."

Richard J. Light, a Harvard professor and higher education policy expert, and his colleagues at Georgetown, Duke and Brown are working to find out how first-generation students fare compared with others. Over the past two years they have interviewed more than 200 students from the classes of 2015 and 2016. The last group won't be interviewed until fall, but some findings are emerging.

Like Mr. Munster, many first-generation freshmen hadn't anticipated feeling less prepared than classmates. (In contrast, students from educated families who were underprepared knew it, and report feeling mentally and socially ready to face that.) They also tell of difficulty explaining their college experience to parents.

Ms. Foy, who is reviewing the Georgetown interviews, noted the added pressure felt by seniors facing the job search and the need to turn prestigious degrees into a payday. While college is about independence for affluent students, poor families view it as a lifeline to better circumstances. "Students feel implicitly or explicitly an obligation to help out their families financially," she said. Students also say that, while they feel supported by the university, "they don't feel part of the greater Georgetown culture."

Colleges may not realize it, but signals they send can project upper-middle-class values. The \$15 for a class outing can require an hour and a half of work; free tickets to student events are supposed to be handled discreetly but get announced at the door.

Dr. Khurana, the Harvard College dean, said his icebreaker for students -- share what your parents do for work -- made a first-generation student uncomfortable last year; he now asks instead for a funny story about their middle name.

Ms. Barros was embarrassed during a history discussion about inequality in which the teaching fellow gave students a list of 20 items, from trust funds to college savings plans, and told them to award themselves a point for each. The instructor asked students to raise their hands as he called out totals -- 10 privilege points, 11, 12 -- so he could mark them on the board. "The numbers didn't tally up" to the number of students in the class, said Ms. Barros, who with only a single point kept her hand down.

Nicole M. Stephens, a professor at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, said such cultural signals enable affluent students to see college as "a continuation of their experience." A first-generation student may wonder "if someone like me can do well here."

Students who don't think they fit in are less likely to reach out for help and more likely to suffer emotionally and have lower grades, said Dr. Stephens.

What would it take to change that?

Dr. Stephens and colleagues published a study last year in *Psychological Science* in which freshmen were assigned to attend one of two hourlong orientation sessions. In one, panelists gave advice about the transition to college and challenges like choosing classes. In the other, the same panelists wove their backgrounds into advice.

A panelist (three of the eight were first generation) might share that "because my parents didn't go to college, this is one of the obstacles I faced." Privileged students shared, too, in one case describing how it was hard to be in large classes because she was used to one-on-one instruction at prep

school.

Researchers then looked at end-of-year grades: Typically, first-generation freshman G.P.A.s lag behind their peers' by 0.3 points. The gap was eliminated for students in the session where panelists shared their backgrounds; they also reported being happier, less stressed out and more willing to seek help than the control group.

Manuel Contreras puts the turning point in his college life at 2 a.m., when he met a fellow first gen at the SciLi, Brown's concrete-and-glass block of a science library, two weeks into a downward emotional spiral in the second semester of freshman year.

The son of Mexican immigrants -- his father, with a third-grade education, is a supervisor at a landscaping company, and his mother is a hospital cleaner who takes pride "in being part of the health care system" -- Mr. Contreras had suddenly, painfully, felt very alone.

He had just returned from winter break in San Diego. In his Aunt Antonieta's kitchen, sipping Nescafe from mismatched mugs, his uncles were wistfully talking about not being able to visit family in Mexico because they are undocumented when, he recalled, "I stepped beyond and gave a whole overview of immigration history." Their "dumbfounded stares" made him feel arrogant.

Did he not fit in at home anymore?

At the library that night, the student he met was also Mexican-American. They talked for an hour and a half, wondering if they were worthy of a Brown education and sharing the stress of straddling two worlds. Mr. Contreras's was a one-story stucco house that his father had added onto himself until there were three bedrooms; his parents relied on him to help pay bills and to translate documents into Spanish.

The encounter in the library was a revelation.

It had never occurred to Mr. Contreras to share with a counselor that he was "feeling sad or out of place."

Many first-generation students, with their histories of self-sufficiency and staring down obstacles, see seeking help as a sign of failure. One boon of Brown is all the tutoring, advising and writing help that one might want. While most students "feel entitled" to academic and emotional support, first-generation students, said Stanley Stewart, a Brown junior, "feel really guilty about taking advantage of resources."

Mr. Contreras fell into more conversations, losing hours in the dorm lounge with Mr. Stewart and Jessica Brown, fellow first-generation students. They planned an independent study project on the socioeconomic factors that affect first-gen transitions to college, and it was turned into a seminar taught by Gregory C. Elliot, a sociology professor. In January 2014 they founded IvyG to connect others like themselves across the Ivy League. The Swearer Center for Public Service at Brown awarded them each \$3,500 last summer to plan the conference. In March, Education Secretary Arne Duncan called to offer help with "your movement."

First-generation students live in a parallel universe on campus. They cannot text parents for help with paper topics or insights on choosing a major. They rarely see them. "Every time there is a parents' weekend it's painful," Mr. Contreras said. "It's another reminder mine can't afford to be here with me on this journey."

But more than any single challenge, first-generation students describe the pressure of something less firm to the grasp: the constant and steady weight of assumptions.

"We are at some of the wealthiest institutions in the world," said Mr. Stewart, whose family relies on public assistance. "No one expects us -- people like us -- to be here."

Correction: April 12, 2015, Sunday

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction: An article on Page 18 this weekend about first-generation students in the Ivy League refers imprecisely to whether the government defines first-generation students. While there is no official definition, federal Trio programs for disadvantaged students do define them: students whose parents have no bachelor's degree. The article also misstates the pledge made by Washington University in St. Louis regarding enrolling freshmen eligible for low-income Pell grants, and when it made that pledge. It announced in January, not last year, that it hoped to increase their rate from 8 percent to 13 percent by 2020, not that it hoped to double the rate by that time.

CAPTION(S):

PHOTOS: Manuel Contreras, Brown; Ana Barros, Harvard (ED18); Jason Munster, Harvard; Anthony Abraham Jack, Harvard (ED19); SELFIE-ESTEEM: Some 250 students attended the first Inter-Ivy First Generation Student Network Conference at Brown University. (PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLIE MAHONEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (ED20)

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**Source Citation** (MLA 8<sup>th</sup> Edition)

Pappano, Laura. "First Gens Unite." *New York Times*, 12 Apr. 2015, p. 18(L). *Opposing Viewpoints in Context*,

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**Gale Document Number:** GALE|A409316060