The College Career:
First-Generation College Students Navigating Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Higher education provides an opportunity to break the cycle of social reproduction and a pathway to upward social mobility for first-generation college students. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction argues that social classes tend to reproduce themselves not only because of economic inequalities but also because of cultural and social inequalities. This qualitative study examines first-generation students at North Central College as they encounter the social and cultural dynamics of college life. The findings show that although the status of being a first-generation college student may make aspects of college difficult, students find a number of ways to compensate for their lack of this cultural capital over their college career and develop alternative strategies that promote their success in their college careers and social mobility more generally.
INTRODUCTION

There is something special walking across a college campus for the first time as a student. There is an energy that cannot be denied and a community that is brand new. In this new community, a first-year college student is filled with a mixture of emotions—expectations, curiosity, and fear. The fear of workload, the fear of failure, and most of all the fear of not belonging are all present. College can be an enchanting institution that offers seemingly endless opportunities but it can also generate deep-seated anxieties. This mix of excitement and uncertainty are especially relevant for first-generation college students, for these students, often unknowingly, carry a weight on their backs heavier than their backpacks. Am I smart enough? Do I know how to study? Will I fit in? As such, the first time a first-generation college student strolls across campus, the thought about walking across the stage to accept one’s diploma seems far away. That first walk across campus holds as much emotional value as their walk across the graduation stage because they are most likely taking a new path and beginning a new journey unlike anyone in their family.

The following study will explore the college experiences of first-generation students. The specific focus will be upon the issue of cultural and social capital and the impact of these social forms upon life experiences at the college. Certainly, the knowledge and skills one gains in one’s chosen field goes a long way towards achieving success in life. However, the sociological perspective always asks us to look further and to examine the college experience not simply in terms of the acquisition of professional knowledge but to also look at the more subtle processes that may impact success in college and beyond. In this study, it asks us to explore the more social and cultural phenomenon that contours a first-generation college’s students success.
It is important to study first generation college students because they make up a large portion of college students. In particular, close to 40 percent of North Central College students are first-generation (North Central College). As such, first-generation college students have a substantial impact upon the character, identity, and success of the college. If one is to understand the mission, goals, and effectiveness of the college, then a more complete understanding of first generation students is necessary. At the same time, a more systematic understanding of the “career” of first generation students as they move from their initial college experiences, to life at the college, to their culminating experiences as their leave the college will also be of great benefit to first generation students themselves. It may help explain why some students achieve their goals after college and why some students struggle.

In order to explore the issues above in a systematic manner, the clarification and definition of several key terms is necessary. The key concept is “first generation student.” By this we mean college students whose parents have not earned a bachelor’s degree. This is the most common definition of first generation college students in the research literature. Beyond this operational definition, this research literature also shows that being a first-generation college student comes with a variety of emotional, financial, and cultural struggles. Though every first-generation story is different, in this study we attempt to find the common patterns that underlie these struggles as first-generation college students make their way through their college career.

Despite these obstacles, many first-generation students ultimately chose to further their education with the hope of having a better life. In order to explain this college journey, this study will analyze it in terms of the concept “career”. This sociological term comes from the social theory of Howard Becker who suggests that this work-related concept can be applied to a variety of social situations in everyday life (Becker, 1963). That is, in any situation that occurs over an
extended period of time, one can examine the sequence of movements from one stage to another. For example, the movement of a medical doctor’s career typically goes through a series of positions from medical school, to residency, to a practitioner. College can be examined in this manner. At each stage along the way, a variety of career contingencies—both subjective beliefs and objective conditions—may influence the development or course of this career. In the same manner, I suggest that a first-generation student may go through a series of stages. At each stage a combination of subjective and objective factors or contingencies may move this college career in one direction rather than another.

If in fact the progress in a college career is often a product of these subjective and objective factors or contingencies, what do they consist of? On the subjective side we can refer to such factors as confidence in one’s abilities, identity as a college student, or personal motivations. On the objective side we can point to issues of financial capital such as the ability to pay for college tuition. This is certainly an important factor determining the course of a college career for a first-generation student. However, in a more subtle manner we can also speak of the available cultural capital. Cultural capital is defined as the various kinds of legitimate knowledge possessed by an individual in a given situation. By legitimate we mean the necessary and or expected knowledge in a given setting, in short it is having the “right” cultural knowledge in a given situation. This refers to the acquisition of the appropriate style, cultural values, and ways of acting on a college campus. By social capital we mean the extent of the valued social relationships possessed by an individual. This relates to the available social contacts and social supports an individual can utilize to enhance their college career or experience. Alone or in combination these career contingencies may play a significant role in determining whether a
first-generation student persists, whether they leave college, or how this experience influences future goals and aspirations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bourdieu and Mobility

The American Dream inherently implies that anything is possible with a good work ethic and hard work. Americans have traditionally held that upward mobility in society is solely based on merit. As a result of this ideology, people from the working class, who have not succeeded as others have, are often viewed as “lazy” and their low economic status is viewed an outcome of their “laziness.” However, Pierre Bourdieu, a French social theorist, has developed a theory of social reproduction in which he describes how the process of social mobility is heavily influenced by the forms of economic, social and cultural capital passed down from one generation to the next. This theory challenges the more ideological view of social mobility because it suggests the structures of society tend to socially reproduce the inequalities in society rather than suggesting that social mobility is primarily a product of individual initiative as the dominant ideology suggests.

Specifically, Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction suggests that social class is often inherited from one generation to the next. Social class is inherited largely through the forms of capital to which one has access. In order to explain Bourdieu’s theory in practical terms, I will draw upon the study of Jay MacLeod’s book, Ain’t No Makin’ it (MacLeod, 1987). MacLeod provides a fundamental sociological look into how economic, social and cultural capital
influence social mobility in the educational system and how social inequality is transferred from one generation to the next.

To understand this idea of social reproduction Bourdieu focuses upon the concept of capital, which comes in three forms; economic, social and cultural (MacLeod, 1987, p. 12). All three types of capital play a role in social reproduction. Economic capital is the most tangible and easiest to understand. It is the financial resources to which one has access. For example, students who have access to economic capital find college to be a more plausible goal because they have the financial means required to attend college, to focus upon school work, and engage in a variety of school related activities.

Social capital, on the other hand, is the social network of relationships one has available. Social capital is less tangible and obvious than financial capital, but can be understood as relationships that are resources. An example of social capital can be a relationship between a college professor and a student. Thus, if the relationship is well established the professor helps the student with professional development not only within but also outside of the classroom. Social capital, in other words, can be thought of as a resource for success.

Finally, there is cultural capital, which is defined as “the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition and skills passed down from one generation to the next” (MacLeod, 1987, p. 12). Cultural capital is more symbolic and is very inclusive, or more likely to be possessed by certain groups and not others. For example, MacLeod explains how experiences of and knowledge about museums constitute a form of cultural capital and are often associated with middle class students because museums are not as accessible to the students from working class backgrounds (MacLeod, 1987, p. 12).
Another key idea from Bourdieu that will be useful for this study and relates to the social reproduction of society is habitus. Habitus is defined as a “system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions” (MacLeod, 1987, p. 13). In other words, it is the attitudes and beliefs of members of one’s social group (MacLeod, 1987 p. 13). But it also goes beyond this to include the subtle movements, mannerisms, and affectations that typically belong to one social class and not another. MacLeod explains habitus with an example: a child from the working class is not as likely to grow up with same ambitions and mannerisms as a child in the middle class because these two children are raised with different examples set by those around them. As such, children in both classes develop different sets of implicit habits and ways of perceiving the world that may unconsciously influence behaviors. For example, they may use different terms to describe a work of art such as “provocative” versus “interesting.” Habitus makes thoughts seem "sensible and reasonable" based on the groups hidden way of thinking. This allows the reproduction of social class to continue because the ways of thinking are not challenged.

Schooling is a prime location for the misplaced exercise of habitus because it is a social institution geared towards middle class life and middle-class dispositions and mannerisms. However, these enduring dispositions run counter to the habitus of students from working class backgrounds. MacLeod suggests that for middle class students there is a “correlation between objective probabilities and subjective aspirations between institutional structures and cultural practices” (MacLeod, 1987, p. 13). In other words, what the school values is also what middle-class students value. This correlation between objective probabilities and subjective aspirations is not as close for working class students.
Taken all together, the concepts of social and cultural capital (and habitus) help to account for the more general theory of social reproduction in society. Bourdieu argues that education is the institution that reproduces social class more so than any other. This is ironic for it is also the institution that is meant to promote social mobility. So, while education is important for upward mobility, Bourdieu suggests that students have to have the “right” cultural and social capital to succeed.

With this in mind, it is therefore important to understand how the educational system, especially higher education, is connected to social mobility and college success. A college degree is often associated with upward mobility, but access to colleges is not something that is generated for everyone. In a 2016 *New York Times* study, millions of Americans tax returns and tuition records were analyzed. The study found that in 38 of the colleges analyzed, “more students came from the top 1 percent of the income scale than from the entire bottom 60 percent” (Aisch, Buchanan & Quealy, 2017). Five out of the 38 schools in this study are in the Ivy League. These results suggest that the processes of social reproduction are at work. They suggest that financial capital is important but also that, recruitment to these schools is also about finding students that have the desired cultural capital. These schools reproduce the social class system because they recruit the “right” students and teach a curriculum that allows each succeeding generation to have the appropriate or “right” cultural capital for the upper class. Overall, this study suggests that social reproduction is deeply connected with higher education and highlights how social mobility is more structured than the “pulling yourself up by the boot straps” ideology. While most first-generation students will not have access to these elite schools, these same social reproduction processes may influence the ability of these students at the colleges they attend.
First Generation College Students

As suggested, the processes of social reproduction influence most students in college. However, one group which is impacted most clearly is first generation college students. First generation college students face unique obstacles within the education system. Susan Lightweis explains that first generation college students are a socioeconomic minority in colleges (2014). As such, the challenges faced by these students are complex because they blend financial, emotional, cultural, social and academic experiences into a difficult to decipher mix. Thus, one of the ways scholars believe that first-generation college students are effected is their willingness to participate in campus activities. Lightweis suggests first-generation college students are reluctant to participate in campus activities as a result of their background, specifically their working-class parents (Lightweis, 2014, p.462). College culture comes with a new set of values and norms which students have to find a way to navigate through. This is especially difficult when the habitus one comes from does not match the college habitus. Thus, cultural capital becomes a commodity that first generation students may not have or cannot spend and this creates a resistance to participate in college life.

Another issue that first generation college students face in regards to cultural capital is college readiness. Cathy Engstrom and Vincent Tinto (2000) studied low income students and their quest for higher education. Although this study looks at low income students in general, it has relevance for first-generation college students because many of these students are also effected by the financial strain of going to college. In this study, Engstrom and Tinto use longitudinal interviews and case study methods to study the impact of learning communities on college readiness. Overall, Engstrom and Tinto found that low income students come to college
less prepared and that students in learning communities are more likely to return to school for the following year because their environment provided them with a sense of belonging and a way to feel college ready (Engstrom and Tinto, 2000, p. 47). Learning communities provide an environment where students feel comfortable to learn and communicate in the classroom. These researchers argue that institutions that do not actively try to make their students feel belongingness are doing students an injustice unintentionally (Engstrom and Tinto, 2000, p. 47). This is important because students that feel a “disconnect” to college are not likely to do well or finish. These feelings of disconnection are particularly problematic for first-generation students. Without the appropriate cultural capital and habitus, these students come with both a financial and cultural deficit and are likely to experience this lack of belongingness long after they set foot on campus.

Yet another concern is how first-generation students interact with professors. Micol Hutchinson (2017) examines these processes. Tying in with Engstrom and Tinto’s study of belongingness and how a sense of community eases the challenges facing students who do not come to college with the appropriate cultural and social capital, Hutchinson (2017) applies these notions to understanding how students engage with professors. Hutchinson (2017) uses qualitative research methods to understand how both first generation college students and non-first-generation college students perceive these interactions. The study found that first-generation college students were more reluctant to interact with professors, which can be explained in part by their lack of familiarity with college habitus compared to non-first-generation college students (Hutchinson, 2017). More so, first-generation students did not develop the skills to interact with professors over time, as most students do. In part this may be explained because habitus is a slow
changing social force and it takes a significant amount of time for students to become fully comfortable in the new environment (Hutchinson, 2017).

Peter Collier and David Morgan (2008) expand on this idea of habitus in their study of first-generation college students. They argue that students must master the role of “college student.” That is, students need to embrace the identity of being a college student in order to fully acclimate to college life. Thus, Collier and Morgan (2008) studied students and faculty at Portland State University to analyze how first-generation students use professors and other resources to ensure success. These researchers found that a lack of understanding of the underlying expectations of the college student role make it difficult for first-generation college students to be successful (Collier and Morgan 2008, p. 442). In other words, first generation students do not have the necessary cultural capital. They do not come from backgrounds that make them familiar with professors’ expectations. In turn, this reproduces social class because the missing cultural capital can lead to bad grades, poor graduation rates and subpar jobs (Collier and Morgan 2008, p. 443). Again, this reinforces the idea that students who are lacking the appropriate cultural resources are the ones that need help. Providing students with a sense of belongingness and confidence to ask for help will go a long way for first generation student’s success rates.

Similar to the idea of mastering the role of being a college student is the idea of the imposter syndrome. The imposter syndrome is the feeling of phoniness in intellectual or professional individuals. In short, the imposter syndrome is feeling like one is fooling those around them by faking their degree of intellect or professionalism, despite the fact that these “imposters” are in fact not faking anything (McGregor, Gee and Posey, 2008, p. 44). The
imposter syndrome is common across many groups of professions, and first-generation college students experience imposter syndrome as well, especially when they are adapting to college, because they often feel out of place or because they do not possess the appropriate social and cultural capital. This is an important aspect of understanding first-generation college students because the imposter syndrome has negative effects on people. This syndrome could lead to depression-like symptoms (McGregor et al., 2008, p. 46). Therefore, understanding imposter syndrome as it relates to how first-generation college students define their abilities is critical to success in higher education. The imposter syndrome plays a role in students mastering the role of being a college student because it plays into the success of truly believing that one fits in.

As previously mentioned, the cultural and social resources available to first-generation college students impacts how they navigate their college experiences. This issue of resources was taken up in another study by Rob Longwell-Grice, Nicole Zervas Adsitti, Kathleen Mullins, and William Serrate (2016). These researchers conducted a qualitative study about the experiences of first-generation college students at private colleges in the Northeast. They performed a series of semi-structured interviews as a way to understand the students’ way of thinking and how each student finds meaning in their experiences. The study found three major themes for first-generation college students.

The first finding suggests that students have to learn how to navigate a college campus (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016 p. 37). This is not about the physical space of the campus, but rather the culture of a college. First generation students often feel lost or marginalized for not knowing how to engage the new habitus. The students that grew up with less economic capital feel marginalized because their perception of college life is not connected with the experiences,
relationships and values that they grew up with. For example, one researcher spoke with a student in the study who expresses her concerns with the university because “the rules governing life at private university were intricately connected to issues of social class” (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p.37). That is, students that come from the working class are not as familiar with the middle class “rules” of college life.

The second major theme of the study is also related to cultural capital. Students describe two complex and conflicting worlds that are apart—the world of college and the world of home (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p. 38). In Bourdieu’s terms, the habitus of home is quite different from the habitus of school for first generation students. In this respect, this study found that students who had mentors who could guide the students between these two worlds were more likely to be successful (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p. 38). Mentors can be a way to gain cultural knowledge that will make higher education less difficult, which is why social relationships are important, a conclusion that Longwell-Grice et al. (2016), Hutchinson (2017), Engstrom and Tinto (2000), and Lightweis (2014) all seem to confirm.

Lastly, Longwell-Grice et al. (2016) found that students continue to face issues with identity between the cultures of home and school, even after they become more comfortable on a college campus (p. 38). Students are stuck between two worlds and as a result it can be hard to embrace the identity of a college student. The study found that numerous students felt tension when they were with their family because their family is often defensive with respect to their own culture. One student described himself as a different person from being at school then when he returned home; his family treated him as if he thought he was better than they were because of his education. The student did not think that he was “better” than his family, but because they
perceived it this way it put a strain on their relationship (Longwell-Grice et al., 2016, p. 38). This highlights the struggle between the new culture and the old culture. Overall, this study points to the complexity of first generation college students’ experiences as they continued their education. The findings represent how intertwined economic, social and cultural capital are in the educational world for college students. This conclusion from Longwell-Grice et al., further supports Engstrom and Tinto (2000), who conclude that “access without support is not opportunity” (p. 50). These two studies complement the need for support of students who may not have the resources to the complete college with success or with the same level of ease as students with resources.

As first-generation college students experience college life, they are faced with a variety of challenges unique to their first-generation status because their capital differs from their counterparts. This study connects cultural and social capital with perceptions of social mobility as first-generation college students navigate higher education.

METHODS

Data for this study was collected through fifteen in-depth interviews with first-generation college students between January and March of the 2017-18 academic year. The students were enrolled at North Central College—a small, private, liberal arts college in Naperville, Illinois. The participants were self-identified as first-generation college students, given the criteria identified in the “Introduction.” This was a convenience sample and as such questions of generalizability could be raised. In this respect, it is an exploratory study. However, attempts were made to select a sample that roughly represented the students at the college. I gathered interviewees by requesting volunteers in several sociology classes. In addition, I solicited people through word of
mouth and a “snow-ball” technique and through making contacts in first-generation college student programs.

Overall, the interviewees range from current first year students to a recent North Central College alumnus. Among the participants, nine were seniors. The study focused disproportionately upon upper classmen because they can offer more insight about college experience as a whole, as they are nearing the end of their college careers. However, beginning students provided insights regarding their social and cultural capital before they were socialized to the culture of the college. In this manner, they provided direct, immediate information about the beginning stages of a college career.

Among the participants there are three students that transferred to North Central from local community colleges. In addition, there are seven resident students and five commuter students in this sample. The other three participants are also commuter students but they have lived on campus at some point in the past. These three students provided a comparison of both residential options to college life and insight into the sources of cultural and social capital.

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

This research highlights the college experience in terms of a career. In general terms, a career is the movement in a sequence from one position to another over time. This movement is influenced by the subjective ideas and feelings one experiences along the way and the objective conditions or outside forces. There are three stages that students face in their college careers; beginning, experiencing and, finally, leaving college.

For some, the college process does not start their first day on campus; it starts when students start looking for schools. The students in this sample all expressed different reasons for
coming to North Central College, but among the participants there was two groups of students; the students that did a lot of research on college and the ones who did not. Most of the students who explained how much research they put into choosing North Central College also cited older friends, siblings or adults who helped them make this decision.

The students that expressed their decision to come to North Central without researching prior to attending seemed to be happy with their decision. None of the students in this group regretted coming to North Central, but some felt that they could have put more research into coming here in order to be better prepared. One student explained how he only applied to North Central College, because he did not know any better. He wanted to go to a school close to Chicago, but he knew nothing about Naperville or North Central. Looking back, he wishes he knew more about Naperville because it was much different from what he expected.

“I didn’t know any better” were words expressed by multiple students that fit into this group of participants. One student said she applied to all of her schools on a whim, while another said she only applied to a few schools because “I did not know any better.” This shows how these students are missing cultural and social capital compared to those students who might have had the resources to obtain this kind of knowledge.

On the other hand, some of the students who did explain they did research prior to picking a school also credited their high schools and other people in their life. Many of the students that had older siblings that went to college explained that they were good resources in this step in the journey. This reveals how these students had some degree of social connections to make this process easier. There is also an element of cultural capital because their high schools also influenced these students’ college hunt.
The distinctions above reveals how first-generation college students differ from each other even prior to attending college. Although both of these groups are first-generation college students, they differ in the amount of resources that they had available to them prior to coming to college. Even though all of these students took different paths to get to North Central, they now have to figure out ways to navigate college.

**Stage One: Beginning the College Career**

The beginning of college is a time filled with nerves, excitement, curiosity and anticipation. This is true for many college students as they begin their college journeys. But, first-generation college students have another layer of transition because they might be coming from backgrounds that do not match the social and cultural capitals of those around them. The beginning of college is all about navigating this new place, and trying to see where one belongs.

**Belonging**

The theme of belonging was common among the participants of this study. The majority of the students said that they never felt any different on North Central’s campus compared to high school, but a few students did. One student who felt very much out of place at North Central explained:

“In a way I felt like an outsider, so I didn’t feel like trying to fit in at all. It’s not that people made me feel like an outsider it was mostly in my head that I felt like I was the outsider. I made myself feel that I was the outsider I think.”

This student expressed concerns about her belonging to the North Central community in the beginning of her college career, which she reflects on as a regret of her time in college. Although, she did explain that eventually she was able to shed this mindset, she wishes that she
did not view herself as an outsider so she could have been more involved as she progressed through college. Here, the student displays her own struggles with the imposter syndrome. As the discussion on the imposter syndrome may suggest, at the beginning of her college career she was stopping herself from moving forward because she associated her lack of capital resources to her ability to be deserving of the role of a college student.

Overall, other students said they felt like they did not belong because they did not like the same things everyone else did on this campus, which is related to the social and cultural capital differences of first-generation college students, as well as the imposter syndrome. One specific student mentioned a disconnect between those around her and herself. Others made her close herself off in the beginning which did not help her gain social capital.

This same student went on to say, “I didn’t feel like I belonged and I didn’t feel like I had the same opportunities but I know in a way I was privileged in my own way.” Earlier in the interview, the student was discussing how she felt out of place, which aligns with the imposter syndrome. However, she adds another layer of first-generation college student struggle when she explains that she did not feel like she had the same opportunities of her classmates. She explained that her high school did not have the resources to do class trips to visits colleges. Therefore, this student did not feel she had the same experiences through her high school that others had going into college. This student is acknowledging her lack of cultural capital as a result of the fact that the objective structural forces were not in her favor, compared to students that might have had access to different resources in high school.

*New Opportunities*

Another finding at this stage is how first-generation college students experience the new possibilities of college. As overwhelming as it seems, some of the first-generation college
students in this study expressed concerns over how overwhelming it is in the beginning. One first year student said that he was grateful to have Cardinal First, the first-generation student mentor group on campus to help him navigate this stage of college. Cardinal First has allowed him to see the possibilities, without becoming too overwhelmed because of the support they offer. This connection helps with the subjective contingencies about feeling hopeful in moving onto the next change of the college career but it also helps in an objective sense by providing the social networks that could enhance a successful career.

*Social Ties*

At the first stage, some first-generation students begin to cultivate mentoring relationships with professors or other staff. This process will further develop in each of the subsequent stages of the career. The importance of developing social relationships with these mentors is highlighted in many different areas of one’s college career because a mentor can help students in ways that will allow them to adjust to their new habitus as they move through college. One student describes his first year of college by saying “in one word, serious.” This student went on to suggest that he had to learn a few hard lessons after messing up some of his classes, to learn that “you get what you put into it.” Regardless of his background and his social and cultural capital, he learned that in order for him to succeed he needed to put the actual work in. This is a lesson that not every student learns, and one that he was thankful to learn sooner rather than later. This student went on to explain that he decided to put more effort into his college experiences which included reaching out to professors for help, getting more involved on campus, and making his social network larger. Taken together, this student learned how to navigate the college world after a bad experience forced him to take college life more seriously.

Another student spoke similarly about the beginning of college:
“that first year doing it alone, no one could answer my questions for me. It was terrible but I did it and I am a better person for it”.

This student had a difficult transition to college, feeling alone because she did not have the resources of social capital to lean on like other students. Instead, she had to navigate how she would deal with higher education without a great deal of social capital resources. She struggled but at the end of her first year she felt more confident in her abilities to know what resources were available to her on campus.

Overall, these students suggest that although the first stage of their college career was difficult, they had to learn from their own mistakes and learn how to cope with the subjective and objective struggles in order to move forward to the next stage of college life.

**Stage Two: Experiencing College Life**

The second stage of the college career is the longest. It is the bulk of the student’s’ time in college. It focuses on experiencing college life and the opportunities that are offered. Overall, the participants expressed their subjective beliefs as they navigated their own college careers in terms of the available social and cultural capital.

**Professors**

Once more adjusted to college life, students are hopefully more comfortable going to professors’ office hours. Similar to the findings of Hutchinson (2017), the students in this study expressed their willingness to go to office hours as they became more comfortable with college in general. This relates to the subjective elements of doing well in college, in addition to the objective conditions of social and cultural capital that will help make this possible. As social capital develops over time in college, students may feel more comfortable and knowledgeable about approaching professors. Students in this study claimed that they had to learn the right way
to talk to a professor, which also relates to the cultural capital that first generation college students sometimes lack. One student expressed how concerned she was when she first started to get used to interacting with professors:

“sometimes I felt that I wasn’t good enough or smart enough because I didn’t speak the way they spoke and it made it difficult to connect and difficult to even reach out to professors”.

This student expresses concerns for speaking with professors because of her lack of capital. Her habitus is much different from the one on the college campus. So, she needs to find a way to navigate the environment of college. This can happen at stage one or two depending on each student.

*Participation in Clubs and Activities*

Another theme that emerges in this stage is the students’ participation in clubs and activities. Clubs and activities are excellent sources of learning outside of the classroom, and for many students they explained how the clubs and activities that they participated in helped them own their identity as a college student because they made many new social connections. One college senior even said that her experiences in extracurricular activities have greatly impacted her college career. She said, “They have defined them. I wouldn’t be the student I am today without those experiences, but I also wouldn’t be the person I am today without them.”

First-generation transfer students have a unique role in this stage, because as they may have adjusted to community college, they are forced to readjust to North Central more quickly or did not have the time available to non-transfer students. This presents a different set of challenges. One student explained that after transferring she had to adjust to North Central, while trying to cope with the new academic challenges. She expressed gratitude for her academic
 transfers advisor for helping her adjust to the academic demands, but in the end, she felt that her education was in her own hands. She felt that it was up to her to make her time at North Central meaningful. This student forced herself to get uncomfortable when dealing with the social cliques that were already developed by the time she transferred and forced herself to get involved as much as she could. On the other hand, a different transfer student did not take the same approach and found herself wanting more from college; she wished she been more involved.

This is important because getting involved matters to college experiences, and it is an area of concern if transfers do not get involved.

**Stage Three: Leaving College Career**

Finally, college students face the transition out of college. This transition is described as both scary and exciting. It also comes with a new set of challenges such as finding a job and figuring out social relationships as a social network beyond college. One of the main themes of this stage is the perception of the future; these students believed that now that they are completely their degree, they will have a better life. This is directly related to social mobility and the American Dream. Although further longitudinal research is needed to confirm or reject the truth of their beliefs, this study shows how first-generation students navigate the college careers in a different habitus then one they are used to, which could also be an issue they encounter in their life outside of college.

As the seniors in this study reflected on their college careers, most reflected on their choice in major. Overall, participants were happy with their majors and their education, but many wished they picked a major that would lead to a specific job. One of the seniors is going to graduate school right away, while others think about it for the future. The seniors that are looking for jobs are grateful for the professors that have helped them with this process.
One senior majoring in sociology said that her choice in majors reflected her background:

“I think honestly my ability to pursue sociology is very related to the privilege I do have of an only child, with middleclass parents so if we had any other circumstances they would be more pushing of me to go a more traditional route”

This student is expressing her gratitude for her middleclass background because she feels it has allowed her to purpose a career with a nonprofessional major. This relates to the idea that not every first-generation college student is similar, and that their backgrounds effect the way they can navigate college.

Finally, social relationships are highlighted in this stage. This stage is where the relationships that are developed throughout the previous stages come into play in different ways than before. Without the right mentors, first-generation college students said that they would feel more uneasy about the future. As hard as it was to transition into college, it will be just as hard to transition out of college, so having the right mentors has been a help for the seniors in this study. A sociology student with an emphasis on criminal justice said, one of her sociology professors set her up on the right career path by “getting me into the door.” She continued to say that each of her mentors have played unique roles in her life, saying that “everyone pushes you in their own different way.” A psychology major said, “I talked with a lot of people while I was in the process of making my plans.” A marketing major said, “My professors at North Central have always made an effort to get to know me which has helped me feel more willing to reach out for career advice.”

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the study was to look at how first-generation college students navigate their college careers, and although some may need more help than others, the help that North
Central College offers students is greatly appreciated by the students in this study. This insight may help the college moving forward in understanding the varying needs of first generation college students.

Although this study does not specifically look at the role race and ethnicity play in the experiences of first generation college students, it highlights the need for future research in this area. Race is a complex component that research has shown to influence the way students complete college. Unfortunately for this study, first-generation college students were looked at as a whole, not specifically in regards to race. To expand and deepen the knowledge on first-generation college students, further research can differentiate among first generation college students to get a better picture about how minority first generation college students navigate college. On a similar note, further research could be done on first-generation transfer students to study their specific needs.

Among the other areas for future research would be post-graduation for first-generation college students. It would be interesting to learn how first-generation college students navigate their new lives outside of college, adjusting to jobs that may be much different to ones in their family’s habitus.

The main point is that as first-generation students move through this career, they may go into different directions and have more or less opportunities for success and mobility along the way. As one junior standing student reflected, “I never had to rely on my parents because I had other connections for college.” Not all students felt same way, not all first generations college students are the same, thus their needs greatly differ. Even still, the need for research and assistance to these students is necessary especially for the students that need the resources.
References


