

Starving for Bras: The Struggle of the First Generation Student

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Walking through the two-level *Victoria's Secret* behind her friend, she gawked as she secretively eyed the different price tags. She'd been happy to go with her friend to the mall, though she knew she wasn't going to be able to spend much money on anything. Plus, she had to go back soon, anyways, to return the laptop she'd loaned from the college's library on time to avoid the hefty fine. She didn't have enough just quite yet to go and get her own laptop fixed, whose screen had gone black almost a month ago.

In the store she searched for something that seemed inexpensive, but there wasn't anything that fit into that category; the cheapest item she'd found she'd actually want to buy was the neon-colored sports bra that cost \$38. Walking close to her friend, she added her opinion on what looked best – “blue or purple?” After a while, her friend remarked, “Aren't *you* going to get anything?”

“Oh, that's alright. I don't feel like it,” she replied.

Her friend gave her a faux-upset look. “You need to get something, otherwise you'll make me *feel bad*. I can't be the only one getting something.”

Frantically searching, she spotted a tub of lip-glosses near the checkout and walked over, grabbing one called “honey dew” - whatever “honey dew” was.

“That's all you're going to get?” her friend asked, skeptical.

“Yeah, that's all I feel like getting. And I have to head back soon, so I don't think I'll be able to look around much more. I should probably be studying for finals anyways,” she replied.

“Yeah, I should be, too. Plus I don't want to spend any more than I will on this,” her friend said, holding up a \$50 white and lacey bra she'd decided to buy. “Ugh, I hate being a starving college student.”

Poverty in the 1G

The term “starving college student” has become infamous - used by almost any and every college student, regardless of their economic security. I’ve personally heard the term used an innumerable amount of times, including by my roommate (who yet somehow has the money to buy take-out, not meals from her already pre-purchased college meal plan, at least five times a week, despite her “starving college student” status). Later in the school year, when I attended a required workshop entitled “Unmasking Your Privilege” for my federal work-study job¹, one of the main complaints from students who attended was the use of the term “starving college student” by their peers who were not, in any way, starving (or in any type of dire financial situation that would lead to a similar scenario). I was happy to learn I was not the only one bugged by the flippant use of the term.

The issue of income inequality experienced by students in college is one that is largely ignored, or trivialized, as one can see by the broad use of terms like “starving college student.” This ignorance is also portrayed in the lack of understanding many students have when it comes to the inability of some of their peers to afford to participate in the same activities they do, such as buying expensive clothing items they don’t “need” and eating out on a regular basis. These students from lower-income backgrounds who cannot afford to go out as much, or even buy some of their college necessities, like books and computers, are often synonymous with “first generation college students” (1Gs), who are defined as college students “whose parents lack postsecondary education or training” (Gibbons et al. 21).

When one thinks about it, it makes sense that many 1Gs would come from low-income backgrounds, as they are coming from families who do not have a college education and are, therefore, more likely to work in lower income fields. Anthony Abraham Jack, a Harvard sociology Ph.D. candidate who studies low-income students’ paths to college, categorizes 1Gs into two groups: the “privileged poor” and the “doubly disadvantaged” (qtd. in Pappano). The “privileged poor” are able to attend private schools or pre-college programs, while the “doubly disadvantaged” 1Gs stay in “distressed” and “segregated” schools (qtd. in Pappano).

¹ “federal work-study” refers to a job approved through the college which is pays as part of your financial aid plan

Both of these 1G groups are described as being impacted in some way by poverty, despite some of the “privileged poor” group’s advantages. Unfortunately, most 1Gs can be viewed as “privileged” in their admittance to college, as they come from a usually low-income household and a poorer school system, which often prevents their peers from obtaining the same educational achievements.

These circumstances account for why 1Gs are a small portion of students on college campuses. Of the 7.3 million undergraduates who attend private and public nonprofit institutions, only about 20 percent of those students are the first in their families to attend college (Pappano). This means 1Gs, the students most impacted by poverty and poor school systems, are a minority group within four-year institutions. Why, then, since students have started to have open dialogues about the issues surrounding other minorities (including different ethnic, racial, and LGBT communities) on college campuses, has there been no dialogue regarding the varying economic and educational backgrounds of students on campus? Why do we still see college students who are ignorant and insensitive to the economic differences and struggles of a fifth of their peers?

A Little Background

Before even entering the realm of college admissions or college acceptance, potential 1Gs are already met with multiple struggles. 1Gs are not only coming from households with parents who have never applied for nor attended a college institution, but also are coming from an education system that leaves low-income students, like themselves, with a large achievement gap (30-40 percent larger compared to 25 years ago) between themselves and their peers who come from high-income households (Piereson et al.). This leaves many 1G students academically underprepared for a college environment; half of students entering California State University, for example, require remedial courses (Piereson et al.). That many 1Gs may need extra support navigating these education systems (Kirshner et al. 117) may also factor into their diminished attempts to attend colleges. Although a large number of 1Gs (around 70,000) could qualify to get into the top 10 percent of colleges, only around 20,000 apply to those schools (Piereson et al.). Despite having the appropriate grades and test scores to qualify (Piereson et al.), these students still lack the knowledge and the

guidance that leads many other qualified non-1G students to apply in larger numbers. However, as colleges and universities have come under pressure to increase the diversity of the student population, they have begun to focus their attention on promoting the enrollment of 1G and low-income students in their schools.

While the White House works to create a ranking system for campus' financial aid programs and tuition costs (Piereson et al.), colleges are making their own attempts at informing low-income students to bring them onto campus. These attempts focus on trying to slow and reverse the growing lack of 1Gs at colleges by providing low-income students with information on how to make a college education seem more affordable and more of a realistic goal. The University of California (UC) system, for example, sent out 5,000 letters in April of 2014 to low-income high-achieving students, making sure to inform these students that the UC system pays for tuition and fees for those students whose families makes less than \$80,000 annually (Piereson et al.) - in other words, attempting to let 1Gs know that a college education is not just for "rich kids." Universities hope to create an environment where 1Gs feel economically comfortable, capable, and "equal" to their peers.

Welcome Gifts

As mentioned earlier, 1Gs can often face daily reminders of where they come from and where they sit in relation to their peers. While other students wore "\$700 Canada Goose parkas and \$1,000 Moncler puff jackets" on Harvard's Cambridge campus, one poorer 1G, Ana Barros, remarked how she could only afford a good pair of boots after saving for two years (Pappano). 1Gs are stretched thin to just try and appear "equal" to their often wealthier peers in anything from clothing worn, to events attended, to food eaten. Unfortunately, social and symbolic alienation like this is commonplace at many higher education institutions due to the assumptions that all who attend these institutions are from a middle/upper class.

Even in classroom conversations, these presumptions about the socioeconomic backgrounds of students persist, and are not discouraged. One example of this comes from Harvard College dean, Dr. Khurana, who admitted to making a 1G uncomfortable when asking the class she was teaching to say what their parents did for a living, as an "icebreaker"

(Pappano). To remedy the situation, she now asks different icebreaker questions (Pappano). But does changing the question really address the true problem? By ignoring these “awkward” topics, students remain unaware that their classmates come from different backgrounds and economic classes, while 1Gs are taught that where they come from is a taboo topic and something not to be discussed. The fact that Dr. Khurana’s 1G student felt too uncomfortable to even say what his parents did for a living shows the kind of social hierarchy based on class many college environments inadvertently invite to continue. Colleges’ current attempts to make 1Gs feel more comfortable may instead be more harmful than helpful.

Colleges are also beginning to “target” 1Gs, going even further to prevent any possible conflict. Some campuses have decided to make sure that students who may have *some* financial aid are not roomed with those who are on *full* financial aid (Pappano), while at other colleges, in order to try and “reduce the stress” of 1Gs on campus, they are providing funds for things such as winter coats, classroom clickers, and groceries when dining halls are closed (Pappano). Even bedding is provided to some incoming freshman, which college administrators make sure to carefully call “welcome gifts,” and not “hand outs” (Pappano). But what good do things like bedding and grocery money do when a first-generation student is unable to text a parent for help on paper topics or feels more unprepared for college life and classes than his peers (Pappano)? It’s true that college campuses are also trying to make some efforts to help with this in providing 1Gs with things such as “Survival “Guides” designed to help 1Gs navigate financial aid and cheap air travel times, as well as “Cheat Sheets” on terminology such as “midterms” for their parents (Pappano). However, what is this really doing? How does handing out information and providing specialized 1G administrators (Pappano) really help those students whose biggest struggle appears to be the alienation and embarrassment they feel from coming from a different place than their peers? Some of the attempts to support 1Gs and low-income students, like literally segregating students by financial situation, only seem to focus on making 1Gs struggles *unknown*. How does this help 1Gs connect to their peers if they feel, and are encouraged to believe by college administrators, that their differences are something to be kept hidden?

We need to stop looking at the “issues” of 1Gs as solely monetary. What we need to do instead is to understand that what influences 1Gs to attend college in the first place, the social support of family and mentors, needs to be replaced by the social support from us, their peers. Once we understand this, we can begin to create open dialogue surrounding the issues of economic and social class within the student body, acknowledging our differences. We need to stop seeing 1Gs simply as students belonging to parents who are “lacking,” and start seeing them as travelers who’ve made their way through multiple obstacles into a foreign place, hoping for a better future, only to be confronted with the new challenge of not speaking the language. College administrators can try to push as many gifts and pamphlets full of information at that newcomer as they want, and it may help, but nothing will help that 1G to succeed like the relationships they build. 1Gs don’t just need a resource, but open acknowledgement, support, and understanding from their new peers – whether when talking about bras or books.

Works Cited

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