

MANAGING ORGANIZATIONS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Internet Access is Not Enough: First-Generation & Low Income Students Need Social Connections Too

Date: April 28, 2020

Author: [L. Taylor Phillips](#), Assistant Professor of Management & Organizations, NYU Stern

Key Takeaways: While remote learning is a necessity during the current crisis, it offers unique challenges for first-generation students. These students are less likely to feel that they belong in college, which in turn harms their performance and increases their drop-out rates. Universities need to sustain connection to first-generation students, not only through remote coursework, but through virtual social and cultural engagement as well.

The current pandemic has forced universities to move to remote learning. Students are back in their hometowns, connecting with their classmates and teachers via video conferences, email and other digital media. While this is difficult for everyone, it poses unique challenges for first-generation students (those whose parents do not have a college degree). Research on first-generation students shows that their matriculation rates are low and drop-out rates are high (Ishitani, 2006; Reardon, 2011). Universities have begun efforts to help recruit and retain first-generation students, and close the social class achievement gap. However, our new research finds that these efforts – focused overwhelmingly on student transition experiences – simply aren't enough (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2020).

We followed a set of elite undergraduates and found that even after *four years* of attending university full-time, and participating in clubs, residential life, and classes, first-generation students still felt the same level of low belonging (feelings of inclusion and compatibility with the college culture) as they did on the first day they arrived to campus. Even after graduating with a university degree, these students typically do not get the benefits of fitting in like their wealthier peers. And this matters – low belonging predicted worse GPA's and lower well-being over time.

Our research suggests a pattern, in which universities bring first-generation students in to the college environment but then drop the ball, leaving students adrift in college cultures that are often wealthy, insular, and opaque. In the end, hard-working, smart students who earn admission to college are prevented from reaping the full benefits of college, just because they were born into poor or working-class backgrounds.

Remote learning likely makes this belonging gap even worse. Colleges have been rightly focused on expanding internet access and safe learning spaces, not assuming all students have the same access at home. However, without the support of friends, activities, and other connection to the college social world, first-generation students are likely even more disconnected and doubting their belonging than normal.

The risks are high. If coursework proves difficult, especially given unreliable internet connections and unaffordable books, *and* students feel they don't belong, then they may not come back when in-person teaching resumes. However, the more first-generation students feel they belong – and they do! – the more likely they are to return.

Implications for Higher Education Leaders

Why do first-generation students report such low belonging, even after four years in college? We find that this is driven, at least in part, by what is known as cultural mismatch: the assumptions of the university as an organization do not align with the assumptions of all students (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). In particular, interdependent motivations – giving back to my community, supporting my family, adjusting to others’ needs – are important to many students, especially first-generation students. But universities tend to emphasize “growing your unique passions” and other individualistic values instead, especially common among the upper-classes (Lareau, 2003). However, even during remote learning, universities have a chance to shrink the social class achievement gap and maintain high quality service to *all* students, by addressing cultural mismatch with the following recommendations.

First, first-generation students usually receive contact focused on the initial “transition,” or fall of the first year. Instead, universities need to include first-generation students throughout their four-year college experience, with sustained mentorship and connection.

Second, connections outside the classroom may matter even more for first-generation student success during the pandemic. Weekly social events – organized via residence halls, clubs, faith groups, or other university communities – may help students maintain a sense of belonging at college, even from afar. In this virtual college world we find ourselves in, cost barriers to belonging can also be reduced. Instead of extravagant Spring Break trips, free virtual tours for all!

Third, faculty in the classroom can expand their own assumptions of what counts as a “good student,” and connect this to course policy changes. For example, participation points are often earned narrowly, via speaking out in class. Instead, we should broaden: students can share a memo, attend and actively listen, or help a partner in pairs.

Fourth, making assumptions explicit can help. For instance, when college faculty assign “an entire book” to read the first week, many students are disconcerted. But by explaining that we *expect* this to be difficult for students, and we’re doing this to help them grow, then students can interpret the difficult experience without doubting their belonging.

Finally, it can take time to change university cultural assumptions. Hiring faculty from a range of backgrounds can help. The more diversity of experience students see, the more their attributions can shift from “I’m struggling, I don’t belong here” to “I’m struggling right now, and that’s normal for everyone.”

Managing Organizations in a Time of Crisis is a series of research briefs produced by the [Department of Management & Organizations](#) at NYU Stern School of Business.

References

Ishitani, T.T. (2006). Studying attrition and degree completion behavior among first-generation college students in the United States. *Journal of Higher Education*, 861-885.

Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Race, class and family life*. University of California Press.

Phillips, L. T., Stephens, N. S., Townsend, S. S. M., & Goudeau, S. (2020). Access is not enough: Cultural mismatch persists to limit first-generation students' opportunities afford achievement throughout college. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Reardon, S.F. (2011). The widening academic achievement gap between the rich and the poor: New evidence and possible explanations. *Whither opportunity*, 91-116.

Stephens, N.M., Markus, H.R., & Phillips, L.T. (2014). Social class culture cycles: How three gateway contexts shape selves and fuel inequality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 65, 611-634.

Stephens, N.M., Townsend, S.S., Markus, H.R., & Phillips, L.T. (2012). A cultural mismatch: Independent cultural norms produce greater increases in cortisol and more negative emotions among first-generation college students. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48, 1389-1393.