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Integrated, marginal, and resilient: race, class, and the diverse experiences of white first-generation college students

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While first-generation college students are ‘at risk’, the majority do persist. Using in-depth interviews with 28 white college students I ask: How do white, first-generation, working-class students understand their college experiences, especially in terms of their academic, social, and cultural adjustment? Moreover, what kinds of factors seem to help or hinder their adjustment to college life? I discovered three patterns of adjustment among these students: (1) about half expressed few feelings of marginality and appeared well integrated into campus life; (2) one quarter experienced persistent and debilitating marginality; and (3) another quarter overcame their feelings of marginality en route to becoming socially and academically engaged on campus, with some transforming their feelings of marginality into motivation for social change. I argue that these variations can be understood by looking at how working-class students’ economic resources may function as an asset, while their whiteness may function alternately as an asset and a liability.

Keywords: first-generation students; persistence; higher education; social class; whiteness; intersectionality

Introduction

Using the definition of a student with neither parent possessing a bachelor’s degree, first-generation students comprise about 34% of those entering four-year institutions (Choy 2001). The ‘combined portrait’ is ‘one of students at academic risk’ (Terenzini et al. 1996, 17), where a ‘disproportionately low number … succeed in college’ (Pike and Kuh 2005, 276). They are ‘more likely to leave at the end of the first year … and are less likely to stay enrolled or attain a bachelor’s degree after five years’ (Pascarella et al. 2004, 250). With respect to first-year persistence rates, 88% of second-generation students enroll in a second year, whereas 73% of first-generation students do so (Warburton, Burgarin, and Nunez 2001).

Although differences in rates of persistence between first- and second-generation college students are statistically significant and cause for concern, the majority do persist. Thus, while higher education researchers should continue to explore the problem of school-leaving, and administrators ought to continue to look for policy options that might mitigate this problem, the heavy emphasis on attrition masks the extent to which such students continue to be present on college campuses. By shifting the focus
to those who remain on campus, more can be done to help them succeed socially and academically.

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the experiences of persistent, first-generation students. Using in-depth interviews with 28 students I ask: How do first-generation, white, working-class students understand their college experiences, especially in terms of their academic and social adjustment? Moreover, what kinds of factors seem to help or hinder their adjustment to college life? My analyses highlight the importance of an intersectional approach (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991), where students’ class and race identities operated as both assets and liabilities.

**Review of research and theoretical perspectives**

To explain the academic and social challenges faced by first-generation students, researchers have focused on three sets of explanations. First, compared to their second-generation peers, first-generation college students have different pre-college traits. They have, for example, less knowledge of what to expect in college (York-Anderson and Bowman 1991), weaker high school preparation (Pascarella et al. 2004), and lower academic aspirations (Pike and Kuh 2005). These factors may result in lower college grades, which may deflate enthusiasm for college attendance or render a student ineligible for continuation.

Second, the persistence of first-generation students is also compromised by their weaker integration into the collegiate environment (Terenzini et al. 1996; Tinto 1993) – what other researchers have conceptualized as lower levels of involvement (Astin 1993) or engagement (Pike and Kuh 2005). For Tinto (1993), students fail to become integrated when they experience a sense of incongruence with the social or academic climate of the campus; incongruence is often linked to feelings of isolation, or a lack of desire to form more frequent, intense bonds with members of the campus community.

Researchers know that first-generation students participate less in extra-curricular activities, athletics, and volunteer work and have fewer interactions with peers outside of the classroom (Pascarella et al. 2004; Terenzini et al. 1996). They are also more likely to live off campus and maintain close ties with family members and friends who are not involved in higher education (Pascarella et al. 2004; Terenzini et al. 1996). These behaviors make it difficult for them to become socially engaged, to gain information about social and academic opportunities, and to shift identification away from previous social commitments (Blimling 1993; Inman and Pascarella 1998; Pike and Kuh 2005).

Finally, some argue that the problems of first-generation students reflect the social and psychological challenges these students face when trying to adapt to the sociocultural world of the college or university (London 1989; Rendon 1992). Typically using qualitative methodologies, these researchers find that first-generation students – especially those from low-income backgrounds – are unfamiliar with the dominant culture of higher education, lack support from family members, and may feel alienated by the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of the college campus (Goodwin 2006; Richardson and Skinner 1992; Tierney 1992; York-Anderson and Bowman 1991). Accordingly, such students may choose to live at home and maintain ties with friends and family in an effort to ease their adjustment to college life. In doing so, they may find themselves straddling two cultures (London 1992), where family and friends are nonsupportive or even obstructionist, on the one hand, and where they may feel alienated from their professors and peers on campus, on the other (Richardson and Skinner 1992). From a psychological perspective, these cultural incompatibilities interact with the...
individual’s sense of oneself as a student, prompting the question, do I belong here (Bean and Eaton 2000)? If the educational environment interacts with the student’s psychological processes in ways that erode his or her feelings of self-efficacy and coping behaviors, the student may answer that question in the negative and choose to leave school.

**Cultural capital and education**

With respect to academic success more generally, researchers argue that students from the privileged classes have an important asset in the form of cultural capital. Cultural capital refers to cultural attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. Within educational settings it functions as an invisible resource – in the form of knowledge about school culture – that selects and conditions some students for success while marking others as poorly suited to academic or social distinction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977 [1990]). Consequently, first-generation students from the working-classes struggle because they lack the cultural capital that is necessary to succeed within higher education. Moreover, they may lack the financial capital that would allow them to participate in activities that students on residential campuses often enjoy, such as meals out and trips to social and cultural events, as well as more costly activities such as Greek involvement of off-campus study (Stuber 2009).

Cultural capital also confers a sense of entitlement, as individuals gain confidence in their know-how and belonging (Lareau 2003). Within higher education, cultural capital and entitlement may manifest as an individual who has a sense of savvy about how the institution works and a disposition that conveys a sense of ease within that setting. Because it is the dominant classes which define and monopolize valuable forms of cultural capital, working-class students often arrive at colleges and universities at a disadvantage. As such, they may experience feelings of alienation and anxiety, making it difficult or even undesirable for such students to become integrated into the collegiate context.

**Whiteness and intersectionality**

Students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds may also function as a resource. Whiteness refers to the socially constructed nature of what it means to be a member of the white ‘race’ (Frankenberg 1993). Although whiteness is socially and historically contingent (Roediger 1991), it is generally assumed to confer privilege. It is the set of ‘unearned assets’ that benefit whites (and disadvantage others) in their day-to-day experiences; it includes the seemingly trivial instance of buying a greeting card that depicts persons of one’s own race and the more profound experience of attending schools where the curriculum, pedagogy, and power relations reflect the experiences and perspectives of white people (McIntosh 1988).

While Jensen (2005) notes that some white people – such as white men and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds – may have more privilege than others, he argues that all white people experience some benefit on account of their race. Hartigan (1999), however, offers a modified theory of whiteness in his analysis of race relations and status competition among poor and working-class residents of Detroit. He found that those labeled ‘white trash’ endure stigma and marginalization – from whites and blacks alike – due to their deviation from the privileges and respectability usually associated with whiteness, such that they experienced their whiteness as a liability.
Critical scholars of whiteness add further nuance to understandings of race and race privilege (Delgado and Stefancic 1997). Speaking of race in symbolic and metaphysical terms, legal scholar D. Marvin Jones says that ‘race is a mask’ (1997, 67), a mask that undermines connection by dividing us from each other and from ourselves. Looking at the material consequences of this dynamic, others (Ansley 1997; Bonacich 1972; Roediger 1991) argue that the cultivation of whiteness as an identity and political force undermines the possibility that poor and working-class whites will forge class-based alliances with people of color. It is in this regard that whiteness becomes a powerful tool in dynamics of class domination (Cash 1941).

Combined with the literature on cultural capital, these insights suggest that white, working-class college students may have complex experiences. On the one hand, they may be expected to experience class-based disadvantages due to their lack of valuable cultural and economic capital. On the other hand, they may be expected to experience race-based advantages due to their whiteness, an asset that helps them blend in with the mainstream. Scholars such as Hartigan, however, warn that this may not necessarily be the case.

The existing qualitative research on first-generation students has typically drawn on samples of students who face multiple barriers to higher education (Bergerson 2007; Casey 2005; Goodwin 2006; London 1989; Rendon 1992; Richardson and Skinner 1992; Tierney 1992; York-Anderson and Bowman 1991). Consequently, generalizations have been made about students who are on the margins not just in terms of social class and parental education but also in terms of race and ethnicity, age, and enrollment status (full or part-time). Little effort has been made to disentangle the ways in which social class, parental education, and race differently impact students’ adjustment to college.

By looking at the experience of white working-class students, this research aims to document the experiences of students who are often invisible within higher education: those who are simultaneously part of the racial majority and socioeconomic minority (Bergerson 2007; Casey 2005; Karen 1991). As such, this research takes an intersectional approach (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality holds that social categories such as gender, social class, and race/ethnicity do not operate independently. Rather, these categories intersect in complicated ways, making it impossible to draw generalizations about the experiences of women – for example – without knowing the race or social class location of these women. This study adds nuance to the existing research on first-generation students by looking at the ways that whiteness intersects with social class within higher education, providing a window into ‘white within white intersectionality’ (Dempsey 2007).

Research design and methods

Sample and recruitment

During the 2003–2004 academic year, I conducted in-depth interviews with 28 white, first-generation, working-class students attending two institutions of higher education. Qualitative research is uniquely suited to gathering insights into students’ perceptions and cultural contexts (Tierney 1992; Tinto 1993). All of these students were traditional-aged sophomores and juniors (19–21), half were enrolled in a large, public university (‘Big State’), and half were enrolled in a small liberal arts college (‘Benton College’). Fifteen were females and 13 males.
Respondents were recruited using systematic random and purposive sampling methods (Berg 2007). In order to locate a diverse sample of white, first-generation, working-class students I began by randomly identifying potential respondents from an exhaustive list of undergraduates. After generating an initial sample of 100 students at each institution (by selecting every nth sophomore or junior), I emailed these students and invited them to participate in the study. If the student replied, I used a set of screening questions to determine whether they fit the operational definition for a first-generation, white, working-class student. I defined first-generation students as those where neither parent has completed a four-year college degree. I defined students as ‘working class’ if they grew up in families where parents (or guardians) held positions in the occupational structure that require lower levels of skill (usually within the manual labor or service sectors of the economy), and offer lower levels of pay and limited autonomy/ supervisory capacity (Gilbert and Kahl 1982). Seventeen respondents were recruited using this method.

Because random sampling did not efficiently produce a sufficiently large sample, I used purposive sampling during a second phase of recruitment. I contacted students through various programs on each campus targeted toward first-generation students; these programs either sent an email to potential respondents or provided me with email addresses so that I could contact students directly. Some programs were strictly scholarship programs and did not provide services; others were more comprehensive, providing students with financial, academic, and social support. I employed the same screening questions to ensure that students fit the selection criteria. I located 11 students using this method. Six were Big State students; three were involved in programs with services and three were involved in programs without. Five were Benton College students, all of whom were involved in a scholarship program accompanied by a range of services.

**Research sites**

I conducted my research at Big State University and Benton College. These research sites are similar in that they are located within the same state and have student bodies that are demographically and geographically similar. Both have student bodies that are largely white (88% at each campus), traditional age, enrolled full-time, and live on or near campus. They differ in terms of size, selectivity, cost of attendance, and campus climate.

While socioeconomic diversity exists on both campuses, it is likely that Benton students are more privileged, on average. Benton offers, however, more generous financial aid and has a history of providing more varied and intensive programming for first-generation students. Big State also offers several scholarship programs for first-generation students, but does not accompany these scholarships with extensive programming. An exception is the federally funded TRIO programs, which recruit and assist underrepresented college students. These programs, however, serve a small portion of the eligible population.

**Analytic procedure**

Due to the lengthy interview protocol, respondents were asked to participate in two interviews, each lasting about 90 minutes; five did not participate in the second interview. The second interview typically took place about three months after the first
interview. Although five students did not participate in the second interview, questions related to the themes in this paper were covered in the first interview, so it is appropriate to include them in these analyses. On average, I spoke to each student for 165 minutes – this length does not vary by institution or gender. The names used herein are pseudonyms.

I gathered these data using an open-ended, active interview approach (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Spradley 1979). This approach was structured enough to identify patterns in the data, while being flexible enough to respond to the particularities of each respondent’s life. The interview protocol followed a chronological order, beginning with family background and the college choice process, through the respondent’s current year in college. The instrument was carefully constructed to allow for analytic concepts to emerge both organically through open-ended questions and in response to themes previously noted in the literature. For example, I asked open-ended questions such as: Tell me about your first month on campus?; What was your social life like during your first year?; and, Are you involved in any groups or activities on campus? Such questions allow students to frame answers in their own words. Because I was interested in the extent to which these students felt integrated on campus, I also asked questions that were more directive in nature, such as: How hooked in do you feel on campus? and, How do you think you compare to the ‘typical’ student?

All interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. I analyzed the data using Atlas.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program. This software program enables large quantities of text to be analyzed in a systematic fashion, permitting users to uncover themes, organize data, and analyze complex phenomena. Data analysis proceeded in an iterative fashion, using a combination of deductive and inductive methods (Patton 2002), as a modified form of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1998). My coding scheme – which evolved both in vivo and in response to predefined analytic concerns – resulted in a typology of persistent, first-generation students, depicting the degree to which they had adjusted to life on campus.

Ten years prior to collecting these data, I was a white, first-generation college student from a working-class background. Like the students detailed in the existing literature, my experiences as a first-generation, economically marginal college student were often quite difficult. This fact is not irrelevant to this study. In each case, I disclosed to the students that it was my own experiences as a first-generation college student that motivated my interest in this topic. At times, I used my identity to generate rapport with the students. When respondents expressed frustration, sadness, or other forms of affect during the interview, I sometimes affirmed their feelings and provided them with a parallel experience from my own life. I believe this served as an important interactional tool that helped put some students at ease. Because the students presented me with diverse accounts of their experiences, our shared identity did not always become relevant. Moreover, the diversity of their accounts forced me to take a reflective analytic stance, moving beyond the assumptions I derived from my own experiences and my reading of the existing literature.

**Findings**

Where the existing literature paints a gloomy picture of the experiences of first-generation college students, I found diverse experiences. Slightly more than half of
these students expressed few, if any, feelings of alienation or disengagement; instead, they described themselves as well-adjusted socially and academically. About a quarter of the students in this sample experienced persistent and debilitating feelings of marginality, resulting in social and academic disengagement. Finally, another quarter overcame their feelings of marginality en route to becoming socially and academically engaged. Among the latter is a particularly noteworthy subset: those who transformed their feelings of marginality into feelings of motivation and purpose. Although all of these students come from working-class backgrounds, I argue that those who came from more economically stable families arrived on campus with resources that facilitated their adjustment. Moreover, I argue that whiteness functioned as an asset and a liability, facilitating adjustment to college life for some and complicating it for others.

**Integrated persisters**

In contrast to much of the qualitative research on first-generation, working-class students (Bergerson 2007; Casey 2005; Goodwin 2006; London 1989; Rendon 1992; Richardson and Skinner 1992; Tierney 1992; York-Anderson and Bowman 1991), just over half of the students in this sample expressed neither acute feelings of alienation from their college peers nor a sense of disengagement from campus life. Dispersed evenly across the two campuses, these students seemed relatively content, describing themselves as integrated into the social and academic domains of college life.

Although many of these students saw themselves as different from their peers in a technical sense, they did not view this difference as especially meaningful. That is, while they believed that the majority of their peers came from middle-class families with college-educated parents, they saw their own deviation from this pattern as largely irrelevant. When I asked Big State’s Monique Hammel – a devout Christian and member of a class-integrated social circle – if she felt her first-generation status ‘set [her] apart’ from her peers, she said:

I remember talking to this one girl on my floor who was in something called ‘Aspire’. I’m not really that familiar with it, but she was telling me that there’s a special program for people whose parents didn’t go to college. I thought that was kind of strange because I’ve never felt like it should set me apart from anyone else. I feel like I can accomplish whatever anyone else here can accomplish. Just because my parents didn’t go to school doesn’t mean I’m set back or anything like that.

Benton College junior Amanda Parker gave a similar answer to the same question:

I don’t think anyone really cares. When you get to an institution like this, you’re not working off of someone else’s credits … Just because my parents have never had that education does not mean that I’m going to be that way. I don’t … feel that I’ve been marked by it because I’ve been able to show to myself and the people around me … that I can hold my own.

Like Monique, Amanda had created a niche for herself on campus: she participated in intercollegiate athletics, was a member of a sorority, and found fulfillment in the community service she performed as part of her scholarship program. Thus, while first-generation, working-class students may recognize themselves as different from the majority of their peers, they may not view this difference as a deficit.
Other first-generation students explicitly emphasized the ways in which they saw themselves as similar to their peers. When asked to compare herself to the ‘typical Big State student’, the earthy and theatrical Angel Curtis relied:

I’m a typical Big State student just like anyone else. I mean, I’m here to learn; I’m in scruffy clothes. I cram in places like the Union or the library, like anyone else … For as much as we’ve been talking about these social boundaries, or whatever, during the school year those differences dissolve because it’s this huge group of students working toward the same goal and you’re all equally stressed.

Asked whether she had thought about leaving school, this sophomore replied: ‘Nope. And the reason is, just so many good things have happened here. I can’t imagine any place that would have as much to offer’. Although some of these students experienced financial insecurities, the vast majority expressed little doubt about their desire to remain on campus.

Unlike the first-generation students portrayed in the literature, many of these students described themselves as having a relatively easy time adjusting socially. Big State junior Allen Schwartz spent his first two years living in an academically oriented residence hall. Of this he spoke highly:

Everyone left their doors open … It was kind of like a family. We did just about everything together; ate dinner together. Several of us were in computer science, and that helped because we would help each other with our homework. And it wasn’t just my floor, either. It was a three-floor dorm and we knew people on all three floors. At night we would just congregate on our floor and play games or hang out.

Other students, such as Benton sophomore Bobby Sanders, became socially integrated by becoming involved in extra-curricular and other formal campus activities:

Everything that I’m involved in has been a really amazing experience – the Davis Scholars Program (first-generation program), Young Life, being a part of the Christian fellowship … being involved in intramural sports and being in Greek life; this past semester I’ve been involved in Student Congress. All these things have just been really fulfilling.

Big State’s Jeff North, an artistic young man who produced plays and other works of art with his friends, found gratification in his philosophy and anthropology courses. And while he was not involved in a single extra- or co-curricular activity on campus, Jeff had a strong group of friends and felt integrated into campus life:

I feel really hooked in to it. I feel like I’m a part of it, you know what I mean. It’s not even so much that I’m involved in academic or campus activities, but just like, I kind of think of it as my home. I just walk around and I really feel like, you know, like it’s all mine; like I have access to everything I want to on campus. I just really feel like I’m definitely a part of it.

Indeed, Jeff – who was raised by his grandmother – preferred life on campus to life ‘at home’: ‘I’m more comfortable down here than I am in my house, you know, and I think it’s just because there wasn’t like a real strong family orientation thing at home. This place is just sort of more me, somehow’. This quote suggests that first-generation students do not universally experience a disjuncture between their home and college environments; in fact, some may find new forms of comfort and fulfillment in college (Levine and Nidiffer 1996).
In looking at these students’ experiences, it seems that one factor that helps explain their positive adjustment is that many grew up in relatively stable blue-collar households, within relatively stable communities. Those living ‘settled’ working-class (Howell 1972) lives tend to have more family stability, stronger connection to the community, and more positive orientations toward higher education compared to members of the ‘unsettled working class’ (Gorman 2000; Komarovsky 1962). Within their economically stable households and communities – with fathers who were often primary wage earners holding skilled blue-collar jobs – these students performed well academically and arrived on campus ready to undertake college-level work. Moreover, most were involved in their high school’s extra-curricular offerings, so that they arrived on campus with skills and propensities that facilitated their social adjustment (Stuber 2009).

That these students were white is not immaterial to the discussion. Indeed, I argue that these students’ whiteness functioned as an asset for their collegiate adjustment, helping them feel ‘confident, comfortable, and oblivious’ (McIntosh 1988). Because many of them had grown up predominantly in white communities, with relatively little socioeconomic diversity, they were raised in a context in which they saw themselves as similar to their peers. When they thought about diversity and difference, they often conceptualized these terms in racialized ways. When asked about programs that targeted first-generation college students, many assumed that these programs catered to students who were racial and ethnic minorities. By linking these two concepts, these students struggled to see themselves as marginal. Students at Benton were also able to avoid thinking of themselves as marginal due to the fact that the college referred to programs for underrepresented students as ‘service’ or ‘leadership’ programs. Students, then, were not primed to think of themselves as members of a disadvantaged group. Because their racial and social class identities had not been highlighted or problematized, their whiteness offered a cloak of comfort and invisibility behind which they were able to adjust to college life.

It is worth mentioning that institutional factors may also help explain these students’ experiences. At Big State in particular, the absence of feelings of marginality among first-generation, working-class students may reflect the fact that they have been largely isolated from the more privileged students on campus. The residential life system at Big State tends to be segregated along class lines, with privileged students clustering in one area and less-privileged students spread out across campus. It is possible, then, that these students have not had intimate contact with the most privileged students on campus and have been isolated from some of the feelings of alienation described in the literature. At Benton College, the intimacy of the campus makes it difficult to fall through the cracks. With small residence halls, an intensive first-year mentoring program, and special programs for first-generation students, Benton has institutionalized opportunities for students to become integrated (Stuber 2009). This highlights the ways in which institutional conditions may help white, working-class, first-generation students integrate into the campus community.

**Alienated persisters**

For a second group of students, feelings of alienation were the norm and persisted into their second and third years on campus. The experiences of these eight students – coming equally from Big State and Benton College – mirrored those of the first-generation students depicted in the literature, where feelings of difference seemed to
result in patterns of disengagement, as they ‘opted out’ of their campus’s academic, extra-curricular, and/or social domains.

Feelings of alienation emerged spontaneously in my interview with Big State junior Patty Ellis. An upbeat young woman, I was taken aback when she abruptly told me that she ‘hated [her] first year of college’. First, she expressed her insecurities in academic terms:

I went from making straight As [in high school] to being on academic probation – which isn’t good, especially when I have to keep a C average to keep my scholarship. It was just terrible. I was miserable, I was absolutely miserable. I hated it. I thought I was stupid; I couldn’t do it. Like, it was bad; [I was] crying to my mom all the time.

As our conversation progressed, Patty’s expression of alienation extended into her social adjustment to college life. Looking back on her first year on campus she said:

I just never felt comfortable. I didn’t feel comfortable in my classes; I didn’t feel comfortable walking across campus. I have low self-esteem and that came out as, ‘All these people are better than me; all these people are looking at me. What’s wrong with me?’ I felt like I didn’t know anybody; I felt like I had no friends; I felt like I didn’t belong here.

Although Patty was on track to graduate, she had withdrawn from her campus’s social and extra-curricular realms. When queried about her involvement she replied:

I don’t do group activities; I don’t do anything. I go to class, go to work, do my homework; leave me alone. I don’t want to be on campus if I don’t have to be. I just want to get out. In high school I was in every group possible, and now I don’t do anything at all.

One key to understanding Patty’s difficulty adjusting to college life is the fact that she lived at home during her freshman year. Although Big State requires all first-year students to live on campus, waivers are provided to students whose permanent residence is within 60 miles of campus. In order to save money, Patty’s parents asked their daughter to live at home. Patty consequently maintained friendships with friends who had not gone to college and felt herself increasingly isolated on campus. Although she did not explicitly name social class differences as the source of her feelings, she characterized her peers as more ‘cultured’ and ‘sophisticated’ than herself; ‘always seem[ing] to know what they’re talking about’ in class and saying ‘Hi’ to everyone they see. She said that it was her ‘fault’ that she had not made more friends on campus, since she ‘chose to live at home’.

Financial circumstances similarly seemed to constrain the adjustment of Suzanne Sorensen and Anna Barlow, students at Benton and Big State, respectively. Like Patty Ellis, neither of these students had become involved in any campus activities. For these young women, feelings of alienation and disengagement were structured by the fact that each worked upwards of 35 hours per week. As a result, these young women had little time for hanging out or finding a group with whom they might connect.

While some of the ‘integrated persisters’ seemed perfectly content having smaller social circles, this seemed not to be the case for Suzanne, who described herself as not ‘really hav[ing] a social life right’. When asked how she felt about that she replied:

I’m not unhappy with it … I think part of it is that I’m really busy, and also, I’m not really trying to make a big huge effort to try to make lasting friendships because I know
we’re all just going to go our separate ways. It’s not that it’s not worth it, but it’s like I have more important things to do right now. That’s just the way it’s going to be for the rest of my college career: I’m always going to have to work … and academics come first.

Elsewhere, Suzanne characterized herself as ‘talking [herself] into feeling okay’ about her lack of social and extra-curricular involvement, worried that if she pondered it too long she would become ‘confused and all messed up’. Thus, while students like these are on track to attain a valuable educational credential, there are some emotional costs in doing so.

Where students like Patty Ellis and Suzanne Sorenson encountered financial barriers to adjustment, New York native Jason O’Bannon encountered multiple barriers, with different consequences. Arriving on campus via ‘Crew-10’, a leadership program that brings 10 students to Benton annually from urban, underrepresented backgrounds, Jason used this organization as a jumping off point for becoming involved in intramural athletics, the campus television station, and a multicultural student alliance. Despite this involvement, he described himself as feeling alienated on a campus that disproportionately draws white, middle- and upper-middle-class students from suburban backgrounds. According to Jason, his classmates cannot understand who he is. When asked how he thought they viewed him, he said: ‘As a white person trying to be black’. Elsewhere, Jason described himself as having difficulty adapting to Benton’s rural Midwestern setting: ‘I don’t, you know, understand the environment. It’s not something my [urban] culture can relate to’.

Particularly during his freshman year, the challenges of adapting to college sapped Jason of all social and academic motivation: ‘To be honest with you, I really didn’t do nothing. I didn’t do any work; I didn’t do any studying. I just lied around and watched TV and hung out with my friends’. With a 2.6 college GPA, Jason had the lowest academic achievement in the sample. Although he enjoyed his sociology major, he described himself as lazy and easily distracted. In part, Jason’s academic struggles reflected his relatively weak high school preparation. Yet when asked if he could see any way in which his first-generation, working-class status had affected his academic life, he replied:

I think Benton’s made me depressed. It’s just a bad place for me and I’m not social and I think being social can help the academics – cause you have people that can help you do your work with; you can congregate with them. It’s made me want to give up and not want to pursue academics as much as I’d like to.

When I followed up by asking if he thought he would be more ‘social’ had he gone to a public university, Jason replied in the affirmative, citing the alienation he has felt on account of Benton’s large Greek system and disproportionately white, suburban-reared student body. While Jason found a niche among his ‘Crew-10’ counterparts, his broader feelings of difference inhibited his desire to form more extensive social connections; his lack of extensive social connections, in turn, weakened his academic performance.

As a New York City native who grew up in a fast-paced, racially diverse environment, Jason experienced multiple forms of difference at Benton. Yet never did he invoke social class as the source of his alienation; instead, he repeatedly framed his struggles in terms of race (even though he is white), urbanicity, and family background. Indeed, none of these ‘alienated persisters’ used social class discourse to explain their experiences. In some cases, they saw their circumstances as a reflection
of unique situations or idiosyncratic choices. Patty Ellis, for example, said it was ‘her fault’ that she did not feel more comfortable on campus, since she ‘chose’ to live at home her first year. For these students, economic constraints limited their ability to become more integrated, yet their social class and racial backgrounds operated in ways that made it difficult for them to understand how social class impacted their experiences. Although their whiteness may have functioned as an asset by allowing them to blend in with the majority of their peers, it concealed important underlying economic differences. Lacking a well-developed race or social class discourse, these students struggled in isolation without a frame for understanding their experiences.

**Resilient and motivated persisters**

A third and final pattern of adjustment is found among students who initially felt acutely alienated on campus, but confronted those feelings, and in doing so became more engaged. As freshmen, these six students sounded very much like those profiled above: alienated and disengaged. As time went on, however, their feelings of isolation and difference eroded and they became more integrated into campus life. In recounting her first few months on campus, Benton College’s Melanie Gerber said:

I loved the school, I loved the teachers, I loved the academics … But the people, I hated the people I was around. And that made it really hard because it’s like, I love being here but at the same time it’s making me so depressed.

Melanie overcame her feelings of discomfort and alienation by finding a place where she was able to express her unique interests, such as being an ally to queer students and practicing her Pagan religious beliefs. Instrumental in this process was Benton’s mentoring program, which pairs groups of first-year students with an upper-level student charged with helping them adjust to college life. Indeed, first-generation Benton students repeatedly intoned the role of this compulsory first-year program in helping them adjust to college:

My first-year mentor was inviting us to all these different clubs. He was a member of Benton United [a queer-friendly group], and he invited us to come check that out. I actually ended up making my best friend at one of the meetings and we’re both members now, and I’m on the executive board. But my mentor group in general, they kind of hooked me in and kept me on campus; [they kept me] from going crazy.

Melanie’s engagement with campus life was further facilitated by her discovery of other students from modest economic backgrounds:

As I met more people here I just realized, hey you’re on scholarships too, or oh, you’re on loans. I kind of realized there are a lot of people here getting aid, I just wasn’t around them. Getting to know more people who understood what I was going through made me realize, okay, I’m not a freak here at Benton; I’m not the only one going through this. It was very disheartening when I felt that I was the only person [having financial struggles].

As Melanie discovered this commonality, her feelings of marginality subsided. A similar pattern is evident in the experiences of Benton College’s Tiffany Morrison. Coming from an economically insecure two-parent family in which she was exposed to emotional and physical abuse, Tiffany saw herself as different from her peers: ‘I know my background was different than a lot of people I’ve met here’, she
said, ‘A lot of people here didn’t grow up worrying, “Oh, am I going to eat tomor-
row?”’ That was a reality for me’. In recounting her first few months on campus, 
Tiffany described her peers as ‘very rich, and just very bitchy. Like, to be perfectly 
honest, they were like, “We’re better than you”’. Despite her initial feelings of differ-
ence, Tiffany eventually found a social niche among her sorority and her boyfriend 
and by finding satisfaction in her academics. By her sophomore year, she described 
herself as: ‘very comfortable here … It just feels very much like home’. Like Melanie, 
a turning point came when Tiffany discovered other students like herself:

I remember sitting there talking one day to a really good friend of mine, and it had come 
up that her family is on welfare and she pays like nothing to go to Benton. But otherwise, 
I never would have known that. I was like, hey, you’re like me! There’ve been so many 
people I have talked to that … you just assume they are upper-middle class, middle class, 
you know, because you haven’t been told any other way, and then you come to find out 
they’re not.

Thus, while Tiffany still saw herself as different from the majority of her peers, she 
discovered a reference group that made her feel less alienated by this difference.

Although many working-class students claimed that they were aware of social 
class differences on campus and could identify the social class background of their 
peers (Stuber 2006), the comments of Melanie and Tiffany suggest that this ‘aware-
ness’ sometimes translates into the assumption that everyone on a college campus 
must be at least middle class. In the absence of contradictory information, even they 
tended to assume that their peers came from economically stable, two-parent families, 
and could not possibly understand their struggles. The irony, however, is that their 
assumptions may have the unintended consequence of rendering invisible other work-
ing-class students like themselves, given that these students assumed that none of their 
peers shared their experiences.

Among this group of ‘resilient persisters’ is an especially noteworthy subset: those 
who have used their initial feelings of alienation as a motivation for becoming actively 
involved in campus life. The transformative experience for these students seems to 
have been their participation in a program for underrepresented students. Each year, 
Big State’s federally funded ‘Aspire Program’ (one of several TRIO programs on 
campus) brings approximately 250 students from underrepresented backgrounds to 
campus for a conditional-admit summer session. If students earn above a 2.5 GPA in 
their summer courses, they are admitted in the fall. Five Big State students in this 
sample participated in this program. Although all five are doing well, the experience 
was truly transformative for Chris McAteer and Ty Mills.

During the pre-college summer program, Chris and Ty developed a sense of camaraderie with the other Aspire participants. When the academic year began, however, 
Chris said that he experienced a sense of ‘culture shock’:

When I first came into the Aspire Program, I loved everybody. I was like, wow, these 
people are the most amazing people I’ve ever met! These people are just like me, they’ve 
been through the same things as me. But then I come into the real year, or whatever, and 
I’m like, I don’t identify with any of these people. I can’t relate to any of these people.

When asked what he meant, Chris elaborated: ‘I just realized that everyone was so rich 
… I was like really shocked’. During their first semesters on campus, Chris and Ty 
struggled to find close friends. Ty, for example, found that economic factors limited 
his friendships:
You just get so frustrated with them asking you [to do stuff] that you just kind of come out and tell them, ‘You guys don’t understand just because your parents give you all this stuff. I don’t have everything given to me’. It gets to the point where they don’t ask you anymore.

Despite their feelings of marginality, Chris and Ty did not relegate themselves to the margins of campus life. Instead, they used these feelings to motivate their involvement. Both became involved in a pre-graduate school training program, high school outreach programs, residential life, peer counseling, and intramural athletics. Chris achieved considerable academic success, participating in study abroad, writing an honor’s thesis, and receiving numerous merit-based scholarships. For both, their involvement was inspired by a desire to ‘give back’. Reflecting on how his own struggles informed his career goals, Ty said: ‘I’d really love to be a director of a TRIO program, or something like that. I could see myself doing something like that, where you’re really helping people in my similar situation – underrepresented groups’. In elaborating upon his educational and occupational goals, Chris invoked a similar discourse:

That’s why I help out as much as I can with these programs [for disadvantaged high school students] – because I want these kids to come to college. Because my friends from home, their lives are done; they’re over … It seems like I’m really trying to save them, but I know I can’t, so I’m trying to save others from … turning out like them.

Chris planned on applying to PhD programs in sociology and education so that he might one day design interventions aimed at improving the experiences of students like himself.

Chris and Ty’s motivation may have withered without the resources provided by the Aspire Program. One of the most valuable resources they gained – and something that many white, working-class students lack – was social support and a reference group:

There were about 250 of us during the summer, and 244 made it through the program, so I had all those people as friends … I knew I had that support. If I had come in without that, I would be like, ‘There’s no poor people on campus; there’s nobody that went through what I went through’. But I already knew those people, so I knew there were other students like me.

According to Chris, this program also provides students with more abstract resources:

Aspire teaches students to get involved, to take ownership of your education, and of your university. A lot of times, minorities and poor kids will come in and they will experience culture shock. They will feel like they shouldn’t be here … that they aren’t part of the university. Aspire tries to correct that, and say, ‘You are part of this university’. Because of that, I still feel like this is my university.

The program reinforces this ethic by connecting students to professors and student mentors, providing tutoring and academic advising, and institutionalizing the channels through which valuable information (about internships, study abroad, and so forth) flows.

Central to this transformation is that Chris and Ty acquired a new vocabulary for understanding their experiences. At times, both used a race-inflected discourse to describe their college experiences – a discourse learned in Aspire and their coursework.
After taking African-American literature, Chris began to see his feelings of alienation in a new light:

I had never read like, you know, a [slave] narrative or an autobiography; I never really read someone telling the story of their life. And just knowing that people have written their own stories and gotten the word out about what they’ve been through, it just made me excited, cause now I’ve realized that I can write my own story … I’ve had a lot of struggles and now I can tell people about what I’ve been through, how I’ve succeeded.

And while the language of race was helpful in understanding his experiences, for Ty, it was an imperfect proxy for his experiences as a white, working-class student:

I’ve taken Afro classes and things like that, and even within those classes, they don’t really push the issue of socioeconomic status. I’m always like, ‘You’re forgetting about socioeconomic status and social class and things like that’. It’s frustrating that people don’t see that.

The desire to develop a more refined social class vocabulary motivated both Chris and Ty to conduct research projects focusing on white, first-generation college students — which they were scheduled to begin the summer after I collected these data.

Although Chris and Ty developed a heightened social class consciousness in college and began acquiring a set of tools with which to understand their experiences, they often resorted to readily available racial metaphors. Indeed, Ty Mills drew a parallel between himself and the ‘tragic mulatto’ of the Jim Crow era, in the sense that he, ‘could pass for a typical white frat boy … with money, parents, educated, good jobs, and things like that. But inside I knew that I was like totally different’. Even as a student who has attained academic and extra-curricular success, Chris McAteer claimed that he sometimes felt as if, ‘there’s really no place for me at Big State. Honestly, I don’t fit in with like the white students; of course I don’t fit in with the black students, “cause they don’t see me as black”’.

These young men’s experiences highlight the struggles that some students may feel due to the association between whiteness and economic privilege. This struggle reflects the alienation they may feel from white students who look like them racially, but do not share the same class background — which may exist alongside the alienation they feel from students of color who share their socioeconomic circumstances, but are not from the same racial/ethnic group. Their experiences also show, however, that a growing sense of class consciousness and the vocabulary with which to name it may function as an asset by inspiring a sense of motivation and purpose (Cohen 1998). Moreover, the fact that they were using ‘hybrid discourses’ — ones that blended understandings of race and class — may prove especially powerful for both understanding their own circumstances and building bridges and coalitions across race and class lines (Beach et al. 2007).

Discussion and conclusions

Although first-generation college students are at greater risk for attrition compared to continuing-generation students, a majority do persist. The present research highlights the diversity of their experiences and provides insight into factors that may help or hinder their adjustment to college life. Among these white, first-generation, working-class
students, slightly more than half seemed well-integrated into campus. For a smaller subset, feelings of alienation prevailed. Well into their second and third years on campus, they experienced strong feelings of marginality, which contributed to their academic, social, and extra-curricular disengagement. Finally, a third subset of students began their college careers feeling similarly alienated, but gradually found a niche for themselves, with some even using their feelings of alienation as motivation for involvement and social change. Although all of these students are first-generation students from working-class backgrounds, they are a diverse group. It contains those who come from ‘settled’ working-class families and arrived on campus with economic and social resources that facilitated their adjustment, as well as those who arrived on campus with scarcer economic resources, making it difficult for them to integrate into their campus’s social or academic realms. Whereas gender is often included in research taking an intersectional approach, I found that males and females were evenly distributed across these three patterns.

For these students, whiteness operates as both an asset and a liability. Because whiteness is correlated with higher levels of socioeconomic status, it may act as a default signal for middle-class status (Morris 2005). In this sense, whiteness functions as an asset, providing a sense of invisibility and similarity that allows these students to ‘blend in’. This assumption, however, may render invisible white students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For students who feel isolated because of their economic disadvantage, whiteness acts as a liability, hindering the possibility that they may identify others with whom they might share experiences and from whom they might draw strength or a sense of validation. Their experiences suggest that in order to understand whiteness, one must pay attention to the cultural geographies within which identities are formed (Dempsey 2007). In settings where racial homogeneity drowns out the ‘noise’ of social class, whiteness may be experienced as a liability; one that limits the development of potentially useful class identities and curtails the building of bridges across racial lines.

College administrators should gain solace, knowing that a substantial portion of white, first-generation students seem to have little difficulty adapting to college life. Even the ‘marginal persisters’ were on track to graduate and acquire a meaningful credential. These students, however, may earn this credential through considerable stress, and without ‘adding value’ to their degree by becoming more engaged in their campus’s social, academic, and extra-curricular domains. Their experiences, then, should encourage researchers to reconsider the meaning and value of a college degree, and undertake the challenge of finding ways not just to keep students on campus, but to ensure that those at risk for early departure become not just adequately, but fully, engaged in college life.

One way in which some first-generation students were able to become more fully engaged in college was through programs targeted at underrepresented college students. Through the ‘Aspire Program’, Chris McAteer and Ty Mills were able to identify other students like themselves and begin acquiring new vocabularies for understanding their college experiences. Their participation also served as the jumping-off point for becoming involved in peer counseling and high school outreach programs. It helped them cultivate what Putnam (2000) calls ‘bridging’ social capital, which tends to be outward looking and unites people from different social locations. Unfortunately, because this program enrolls only about 250 students each year – the majority of whom are racial and ethnic minorities – it has little impact on the broader population of white, first-generation students.
That being said, researchers are still trying to understand exactly how such programs work and what array of programs and services are best for which students (Balz and Esten 1998; Chaney et al. 1998). Where Chris and Ty seemed to benefit from the comprehensive social and academic services provided by ‘Aspire’, Jason O-Bannon seemed to suffer from the extent to which his participation in ‘Crew-10’ curtailed his ability and/or desire to form more extensive ties on campus. Although he found a small friendship group with whom he engaged in a few extra-curricular activities, he felt isolated on campus as a whole. In Jason’s case, ‘Crew-10’ seemed to augment his ‘bonding’ social capital, which provides social and psychological support from people in similar circumstances, while creating in-group ties and out-group antagonisms (Putnam 2000).

From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that while targeted first-generation programs provide critical resources to their constituents, such programs should both connect students to others like themselves and foster their connection to the campus community as a whole. They should be designed to foster network diversity (Erickson 1996) and extensive weak ties (Granovetter 1973), both of which have been found to have myriad social benefits. Indeed, this is the insight gained from Uri Triesman’s (1985, 1992) studies of academic success among racial and ethnic minorities, where African-American students improved their performance by forming small, socially heterogeneous study groups in which they shared both academic and social support. Triesman’s model, which has been replicated on campuses across the nation, illustrates the ways in which social and academic integration work in tandem. This finding, moreover, has been increasingly confirmed by updated models of student retention, where the classroom is viewed as a critical site for forming the kinds of communities and social relationships that are essential for collegiate success (Tinto 1997, 2000). The implication for practice is that programs for first-generation students should be built on best practices that help to build human and social capital within a diverse environment characterized by high levels of social support.

Yet the challenge is not just to design programs that help expand students’ horizons while connecting them to other students like themselves, the challenge is also to figure out which students would benefit from such a program and which will do well without such an intervention. This will not be an easy task. Some students may be difficult to serve because as white first-generation students, they may not define their struggles as related to social class or parental education, hence they may not see themselves as in need of services. Other students may be too busy or may have already psychically disconnected, so that they may be unable or unwilling to participate in targeted programming. Perhaps the best programs are those that are compulsory – such as the first-year seminar program at Benton College – so that students do not feel stigmatized or in need of remediation; those where they can participate in learning communities and service work, both of which have been found to enhance academic development (Astin and Sax 1998) and, by extension, retention.

From a theoretical perspective, it is noteworthy that so few of these students used an explicit language of social class to describe their college experiences. This may not be surprising, however, given the fact that class identities tend not to be especially salient in the USA and beliefs of individualism and equality of opportunity prevail (Hochschild 1995; Jackman and Jackman 1985; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Instead, they constructed explanations by naming urban, suburban, and rural distinctions; by labeling students as more ‘sophisticated’ or more ‘cultured’; or by referring to the constraints of social class as choices or temporary circumstances. It is unclear, though, whether
they are purposefully ‘coding’ their language or whether they truly lack a social class discourse. What is clear, though, is that acquiring a more refined social class vocabulary helped motivate some students to work toward improving the educational experiences of people like themselves. Their experiences illustrate that being able to name one’s experience can help empower people to seek social change.

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Note
1. Currently, the federal government operates seven TRIO programs. These programs were initially implemented under Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 and consisted of three separate programs – Upward Bound, Project Talent, and Student Support Services.

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