

First-Generation College Students: Issues of Cultural and Social Capital

Socioeconomic classes develop subcultures that can be quite different from one another, and when one changes subcultures, it can be confusing and alienating. College campuses provide an example because they are dominated by middle-class cultures. First-generation college students often find themselves in a world as alien as visiting another country. Students whose parents went to college are more likely to have cultural and social capital that helps them understand their professors, who are generally part of the middle-class culture. Answer the following survey questions. How might your own cultural and social capital cause you to feel at home or alienated, privileged or disprivileged, in a college environment?

A. Which of the following experiences were part of your childhood?

- ☐ Had a library of books (at least 50 adult books) in your childhood home
- ☐ Had parents who read a newspaper on a daily basis
- ☐ Had parents who subscribed to news magazines (e.g., *Time*, *The Economist*)
- ☐ Listened to music as a family, including classical or instrumental music such as harp or flute
- ☐ Traveled to at least 20 other states or to at least five other countries
- ☐ Took regular trips to the library
- ☐ Took regular trips to museums
- ☐ Attended plays (theater productions) and concerts
- ☐ Played a musical instrument
- ☐ Took dance lessons
- ☐ Listened to National Public Radio (NPR)
- ☐ Watched PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) on television

B. Which of the following *relationships* were part of your childhood?

- ☐ My parents knew at least two influential people in my community on a first-name basis—such as the mayor, members of the city council, the superintendent of schools, the governor, and the district’s representative to Congress.
- ☐ The regional leader of my religious group—church, temple, or mosque—knew and respected my family.
- ☐ My parents knew, on a first-name basis, at least three CEOs of corporations.
- ☐ When I entered new situations in high school, it was likely that my parents were known by the coaches, music directors, summer camp directors, or others “running the show.”
- ☐ When I came to college, one or more professors and administrators at the college knew my parents, a sibling, or another family member.
- ☐ I have often interacted directly and effectively (in a nonadversarial way) with authority figures.

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1. If you experienced many of the items under A at home, you had fairly high cultural capital. If you marked most of the items under B, you had a lot of social capital. If you did not, you may find the culture of a 4-year college campus to be alien and even confusing. How well does your background match up with the cultural capital of a college?
2. Which of the following aspects of a college campus do you think might make a first-generation college student feel most alienated at your college: *economic* capital (money), *social* capital (networks with those who have resources), or *cultural* capital (knowledge of important aspects of the culture)? Why?

Source: Survey constructed, in part, using ideas from J. Morris and Grimes (1997).