

**Experiences and Perspectives of First-Generation Students at
The College of Wooster
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Last year's report, "Student Assessment of the Center for Academic Advising," recommended that the Center make special efforts to target what might be underserved segments of the student population, including first-generation college students. The report suggested the possibility of a focus group of first-generation college students "in order to understand better the problems that they face, and how better to communicate with them and meet their needs."¹ Toward that end, the three co-authors of this report collaborated on a project in the spring of 2010 that focused on the campus's first-generation students, defined as students whose parents either did not attend college or, if they did take college classes, never graduated.²

In late February 2010, the Center for Academic Advising (CFAA) placed posters around campus that included the photos of first-generation faculty members and encouraged current first-generation students at the College to contact the Associate Dean for the Class of 2012 to participate in a focus group with other first-generation students later in the spring; the Associate Dean also contacted faculty to get their help in encouraging participation. The Associate Vice President for Institutional Research, Assessment, and Planning created a list of domestic first-generation students at the College, based on Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) information, while the Associate Dean of Students for Academic Success and Retention constructed a list of first-generation international students. Each of the students on these two lists then received an invitation in late March that invited them to participate in a focus group in order to share their experiences and perspectives and to help the College better meet the needs of first-generation students.

In total, two focus groups were held: one with 7 domestic first-years and sophomores, and one with 6 domestic juniors and seniors. A third planned focus group for international

¹ Denise M. Bostdorff and Peter Havholm, "Student Assessment of the Center for Academic Advising," August 2009, 5-6.

² While definitions vary, Ishitani says first-generation college students may include "parents whose highest educational attainment was either a high school diploma or less" and those students who had one or more parents who attended college but never earned a bachelor's degree. See Terry T. Ishitani, "Studying Attrition and Degree Completion Behavior among First-Generation College Students in the United States," *Journal of Higher Education* 77 (Sept./Oct. 2006): 868.

students did not take place because students were too busy at that point in the semester to attend. Beyond the focus groups, the Associate Dean for the Class of 2012 conducted personal interviews with an additional 8 students, including 2 international students. In all, a total of 21 first-generation students participated in this project. The low number of international students notwithstanding, the student participants reflected a diversity of majors and class years (first-years/sophomores vs. juniors/seniors), and were fairly representative in regard to gender and ethnicity (see Appendix A).

Students in the focus groups and interviews responded to a set of open-ended questions intended to stimulate discussion and provide a plethora of responses, thereby creating a rich set of data for analysis (see Appendix B for questions).

Major Findings

Throughout the focus group discussions and personal interviews, a number of recurring themes became evident.

First-generation students decide to go to college primarily for two, not necessarily discrete, reasons: to advance economically and to fulfill the expectations of parents, especially mothers. In our focus group with first-years and sophomores, one student said that college was essential for job opportunities, a sentiment that others in this project often echoed. All 7 students in the first focus group said their parents expected them to go to college; likewise, all 6 students in the junior/senior focus group reported that they had known they were going to college for a very long time, as their parents were insistent on this point. Of the 8 students in the one-on-one interviews, several talked about their own interests in wanting to go, but all 8 also mentioned the role of their parents. One student, for instance, noted, “I’ve always wanted to go, and I worked really hard. I wanted to see myself go far in life, and I wanted money for myself and my family ever since I was in the 4th or 5th grade.” Likewise, another student decided to go to college once she learned that her interests were actually part of a field that she could study; in addition, “I wanted to make my mom proud.”

Indeed, mothers appeared to play an especially crucial motivating role for many first-generation students, a number of whom reported being raised by a single mother. One interviewee explained, “My mom always wanted me to go. She had me when she was 17 and pretty much raised me alone, so economics was a big part of it [the decision to go to college].” Even students who grew up in two-parent homes, however, often pointed to their mothers. According to one interviewee, “My mom went for a year and dropped out when her mother died,” so college “was expected. You just do that.” A female student reported, “My mom wanted me to go because they didn’t tell girls to go when she was young, and she thought things would be different if she had gone, economically, and that she’d be happier with her job.”

While financial aid packages play a major role in their decision to come to Wooster, first-generation students are also more likely to end up at the College when they and/or someone else they know have had experiences here prior to the application process. Over half of the students pointed to such connections. Some said they had been on campus previously,

either for school activities such as Power of the Pen or band, or because a relative worked on campus or in town. In other cases, the student knew someone who already was playing a sport at Wooster, had a favorite teacher who had graduated from Wooster or whose child had gone to Wooster, had a parent who worked at a GLCA school who was familiar with Wooster, or went for a campus visit with friends and their father who was an alum. Two students said that their guidance counselors pushed Wooster. Another student, from the West, discovered Wooster on her own in *Colleges That Change Lives* and asked her counselor about the College. The counselor, as it turned out, was from Orrville and then called her own mother to confer.

Those without direct or indirect connections to the college learned about Wooster in different ways: from a football recruiter (1), from a college fair (2), from a tour offered by the I Know I Can Program (1), from the financial advisor at the mother's workplace who advised employees' children on choosing colleges (1), and from the U.S. embassy in the student's home country (1).

First-generation students are highly independent, but also face obstacles in managing issues related to college life. In our discussions and interviews, students often mentioned that they were very “independent” and liked to do things on their own. The self-reliance of first-generation students is both a function of the situation in which they find themselves and an attribute that helps them to manage that situation. For example, one student revealed that neither of her parents spoke English very well, so she had to navigate the application process and FAFSA forms herself. Likewise, participants found themselves—as many first-generation students do—working more hours than their peers in order to pay for their education.³ The independence that serves first-generation students so well in many respects, however, may also serve as an impediment to their success, as one-third of our participants said they found it difficult to ask for help.

When asked what obstacles they had encountered in college, students mentioned a number of major challenges: their academic preparation for college (2); the pace and high academic standards of Wooster (2); poor study habits or time management (4); lack of knowledge about the logistics of college academics, such as picking classes (2), choosing a major (4), doing a take-home exam without violating principles of academic honesty (1), finding a tutor (1), or dropping a class (1). Several students (3) also said they experienced pressure to succeed. According to one participant, he felt the need to “make it” in college for himself, his mother, and his sister. Another student talked about the pressure of being the first in the family to go to college and how it was important not to waste the family's resources. Even if they did not mention pressure for success explicitly, students often talked about feeling “obligated” to pay back any loans that their parents or their grandparents might have provided. This sense of obligation may have been heightened if, as we noted in several cases, the student was the oldest in his/her family, since the student may have been especially aware of the need to conserve resources for younger siblings. In sum, first-generation students at Wooster reflected the traits

³ In our focus group with juniors and seniors, for instance, 5 of the 6 students had jobs during the school year, with 4 of those 5 students working on average 10-13 hours per week. The fifth student was currently working only 3 hours per week, but was looking for an additional campus job. Also see: Ernest T. Pascarella, Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini, “First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 75 (May/June 2004): 278.

that research has found in first-generation college students elsewhere: they tend to feel less prepared for college than their peers; they lack knowledge (whether direct or from relatives) about college and the “bureaucratic operations of higher education”; they struggle with time management; and they fear failing to a higher degree than students whose parents have graduated from college.⁴

More than any other obstacle, however, students (13, or roughly 62% of participants) mentioned the twin issues of money pressures and figuring out the logistics of financial aid, a finding consistent with past research that found first-generation students struggled with these issues more than other students.⁵ For example, a senior reported that she had worked nearly full-time at a local discount store during her first year of college. Other students worked and took out loans, although they sometimes found it difficult to find co-signers, while some turned to parents and grandparents who took out loans for them or loaned them money directly; in a pinch, one international student borrowed money from another student.

Related to the pressures of paying for their educations, first-generation students also found navigating the financial aid process extremely difficult. While two participants had mothers who helped them by reading the paperwork for loans, students often found themselves completely on their own. One student summed up the sentiment of many when she said, “I didn’t know how to do anything” with financial aid or where to go for loans. Similarly, another testified, “I couldn’t get a consistent loan from the same place—one bank went out of business, and I had to find another. I didn’t know where to go or if I could consolidate. It was all overwhelming.” Because of these complexities, first-generation students consistently expressed their need to have someone at Financial Aid with whom they could talk—not about getting more money—but about the student loan process itself in order to answer the question, as one student put it, of “How do I figure this out?” Seniors also said it was essential to have face-to-face counseling, versus an online exit program, to help them understand better what to expect with loans once they graduated.

In regard to demographics, one student said that it had been difficult to move to Wooster after living in a large city, while another admitted, “Being black made moving here a shock” initially. **Class, however, was the demographic obstacle mentioned most often, and it was typically younger first-generation students who did so.** While only two juniors or seniors cited class, a younger student raised the issue in our focus group with first-year and sophomore students, where it clearly touched a nerve and prompted a great deal of discussion. In their early college experience, younger participants were struck with the contrast between their own socio-economic background and that of their wealthier peers, which sometimes led to feelings of estrangement. One student, for example, said people in his high school did not have much money, but at Wooster there are students whose parents are doctors or own their own companies, which sometimes made him feel “left out.” Another student contrasted her own situation—

⁴ Khanh Van T. Bui, “First-Generation College Students at a Four-Year University: Background Characteristics, Reasons for Pursuing Higher Education, and First-Year Experiences,” *College Student Journal* 36 (March 2002): n. pag.; Paul B. Thayer, “Retention of Students from First-Generation and Low Income Backgrounds,” *The Council Journal*, May 2000, 3.

⁵ Bui n. pag.; Thayer 3.

working two jobs while taking a full course load—with that of a friend who lives in a \$3 million home. Likewise, a third student, who works 20 hours each week because he also needs to support family members outside the United States, wistfully observed that his roommate has plenty of free time because his parents are paying for his schooling.

In some cases, these class contrasts led to discomfort or even conflict. One student said she was embarrassed to talk about the amount of financial aid she received for fear that her friends would think she was siphoning money away from them, while another expressed frustration that his friends thought he was being cheap when they went out because they did not understand that he had to spend his money carefully. In yet another instance, a student, whose immigrant parents both work in factories, recounted how he had expressed his willingness to buy items for the dorm room that he shared, only to have his roommate later imply that the student was mooching and taking advantage.

Since older students tended not to mention class conflicts, it may be that, over time, first-generation students simply become more acclimated to the contrasts and feel more adept—and perhaps less intimidated—in managing them. For example, one older student, who did mention class, commented that she had been overwhelmed in her First-Year Seminar by the language that other students used and was convinced that they were smarter and knew more than she did because of their parents and life experiences. After doing presentations and working in groups, though, the student said, “I realized that I was just as smart as they were.” Nonetheless, class was an issue particularly for newer students, with two younger white participants expressing frustration over last year’s “white privilege” awareness campaign on campus that, from their perspective, ignored the issue of class. One senior also felt that some professors in her first year of college did not fully appreciate that not all students come from schools with state-of-the-art facilities and AP courses. In light of past research on first-generation students, the prominence of class in our participants’ discussions and interviews should come as no surprise. Gender, race, and class are all factors that may impact first-generation success, but evidence suggests that class may, indeed, be “a better predictor of success in college than race or gender.”⁶

Moreover, the various obstacles mentioned by first-generation students at Wooster have the potential to work in tandem to deter student success since the class status of many first-generation students means they have less economic capital, which leads them to work more which, in turn, leads to less social capital (the students’ connections and networks with others) and less cultural capital (the students’ status in and knowledge of academic culture and their own college institution).⁷ In other words, first-generation students tend to come to campus with economic, social, and cultural obstacles to college success, but their effort to improve their

⁶ Rob Longwell-Grice and Hope Longwell-Grice, “Testing Tinto: How Do Retention Theories Work for First-Generation, Working-Class Students?” *Journal of College Student Retention* 9 (2007-2008): 410. In addition, see: Thayer 4. It is also the case, however, that both nonwhite students and students from low-income families “tend to be disproportionately represented” among first-generation college students. See: Susan P. Choy, *Students Whose Parents Did Not Go to College: Postsecondary Access, Persistence, and Attainment* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2001), 29.

⁷ Amy Aldous Bergerson, “Exploring the Impact of Social Class on Adjustment to College: Anna’s Story,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 20 (Jan.-Feb. 2007): 112-113; Buffy Smith, “Accessing Social Capital through the Academic Mentoring Process,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 40 (2007): 38.

finances simultaneously undermines their ability to engage in activities that can lead to social and cultural growth. Pascarella et al. found that that extracurricular involvement and noncourse-related interactions with peers had a greater positive impact on critical thinking, writing skills, and scientific reasoning, as well as “degree plans, sense of control over (and responsibility for) their own academic success, and preference for higher-order cognitive tasks” in regard to first-generation students than other students. By being involved with extracurricular activities and peers, first-generation students learn from classmates who have “a better understanding of behaviors that help individuals succeed in, and maximize the benefit they receive from, college (e.g., study strategies or how to choose courses).”⁸ Additionally, Inkelas et al. concluded that first-generation students might especially benefit when faculty and staff create structured opportunities for first-generation students to interact with them and their peers which may, in turn, encourage more informal interactions, as well. Living-learning programs can function usefully in this role,⁹ but viewing a film outside of class with a professor and classmates or completing a service project with a staff member and peers, for example, might also contribute in this way.

The experiences of first-generation students at Wooster also mirror one of the ideas articulated by the Task Force on Advising in 2009 and 2010: that advising takes place in many locales and involves many key partners on campus. When asked where they turned for advice, first-generation students listed a wide range of sources: RAs, members of teams (sports, moot court, etc.), hallmates and roommates in residence halls, friends and/or relatives who were students on campus, coaches, FYS advisors, faculty members, staff members in academic departments or the Dean of Students Office, the Peer Mentoring Program, and members of a program house. Peers clearly played a major role, especially when students first came to campus and were more reluctant to seek help.

At the same time, relatively few students reported turning to academic support services like the Writing Center, Math Center, and Learning Center, or to Career Services for advice. This finding was a bit of a puzzle. One explanation may be that first-generation students seek these centers out less often than they do other sources of guidance/advice/support and, as a result, are less likely to mention these support services than they are other sources of assistance such as fellow students, faculty members, coaches, etc. In addition, students may still attach some stigma to using academic support services and hence perhaps were less likely to volunteer that they use these services, particularly when in the focus group setting, even if they do so. It is also the case that we did not explicitly ask students if they utilize these specific resources. However, in a follow-up question to the junior/senior focus group, the facilitator inquired as to how many students had made use of Career Services, and almost no one had. This points to yet another explanation: that first-generation students are somehow not getting the message and/or are not acting on the message that they should employ such resources.

⁸ Ernest T. Pascarella, Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini, “First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 75 (May/June 2004): 278.

⁹ Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Zaneeta E. Daver, Kristen E. Vogt, and Jeannie Brown Leonard, “Living-Learning Programs and First-Generation College Students’ Academic and Social Transition to College,” *Research in Higher Education* 48 (June 2007): 425, 423.

According to one senior interviewee, “I didn’t know Career Services even existed” until he was assigned a Senior IS advisor who encouraged him to go. He found, to his delight, “They were really helpful.” Even if first-generation students do know about resources, it may be that their self-described independence and reluctance to seek assistance prevent them from acting.

Finally, while some first-generation students turned to their parents for support and advice, students more often said that their parents were unable to assist them, even if they were supportive. Three students in our focus groups and interviews volunteered that their parents provided them with emotional support. One student said that her entire family comes to watch her play in her college sport, and “they get excited when something good happens to me.” For another student, “They [his parents] were supportive if I needed it, but I didn’t feel the need to turn to them.” A third student observed that her mom “is very supportive and excited,” but “she doesn’t direct everything I do.”

Overall, most students reported that their parents could not provide informed advice. One student, for instance, said he “might” ask his parents for their opinion, but he knew he needed to turn to faculty members and others for college-related advice since his parents had no experience in that arena. In another instance, a student described her mother as “oblivious,” so the student sought out help from an uncle and grandparents instead. The children of immigrants were especially likely to say their parents could not assist them. As one student explained, her parents could not grasp the idea of flex dollars or swiping in Lowry, let alone course requirements and financial aid. Two other students whose parents were immigrants underscored that their fathers had not gone to college—one was a high school dropout—and their mothers did not speak English very well, which meant they were unable to help.

Nonetheless, a few students said their parents *were* able to provide them with useful advice or tried to find ways to do so. For example, two mothers read the financial aid paperwork for their son or daughter, while another mother memorized the entire Wooster website so she could point her daughter in the right direction. According to a focus group participant, her father earned his GED at age 33 and worried about her and wanted her to succeed, so he would print out information from the web that he thought might be useful to her and leave it outside her bedroom door when she was home. Parents’ desire to help and support their students underlines the recommendation of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) in its 2008 report that colleges “need to make sure that middle-class and upper-middle-class standards of behavior do not dictate institutional policy” and that “services for parents need to be targeted at and accessible to all parents, regardless of their income and donations.”¹⁰ While reaching all parents is a significant and perhaps impossible challenge, parents—including parents who did not go to college—can support and assist their students best when colleges create friendly policies and communicate relevant information in clear, accessible ways.

¹⁰ Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), “Recommendations,” *Higher Education Report* 33 (2008): 98.

Suggestions

First-generation college students (85 domestic students and 8 international students) compose 14.6% of the incoming Class of 2014 or the equivalent of 6 sections of First-Year Seminar.¹¹ While first-generation students are 34% less likely to drop out of private institutions than public institutions,¹² our focus groups and interviews indicate that Wooster could also take steps to improve its communication with and better meet the needs of its first-generation students. We therefore suggest that the College do the following:

1. Conduct a focus group with first-generation international students from all class years in the fall of 2010 to learn more about the issues that face this particular segment of first-generation students at Wooster.
2. Undertake focus groups with members of the Class of 2014 (both domestic and international students) in mid-September 2010 and then again periodically throughout their first year, to chronicle the issues that they face and the strategies that they use to resolve them.
3. Address students' expressed need for assistance with financial aid procedures, such as completing the FAFSA or securing an educational loan, by designating a liaison in the Office of Financial Aid who can provide outreach activities and respond to questions. Katie Wilson, office manager, has expressed interest in serving in this role.
4. Provide face-to-face counseling at Financial Aid for students about to graduate, rather than having students complete an online exit program, so they will better understand what to expect with regard to student loans.
5. Provide structured opportunities for first-generation students to develop additional social and cultural capital through interactions with peer leaders. The College can inform resident assistants, resident directors, and teaching assistants for First-Year Seminars of ways to help connect new students with resources such the Peer Mentoring Program and campus support services. Residence Life staff members have already indicated their support for incorporating these ideas in the training of student staff; this information could easily be included in the training of teaching assistants for First-Year Seminar, as well.
6. Promote structured interactions between students and faculty outside the classroom through such means as watching course-related films, attending Forum programs together, and participating in pre-professional clubs, as well as by establishing living-learning communities. Such activities would supplement the opportunities that many

¹¹ This statement is based on the number of deposits on record as of May 8, 2010. Nationwide, 30% of all college students are first-generation, reflecting an increase in the last decade. See: Terrell L. Strayhorn, "Factors Influencing the Academic Achievement of First-Generation College Students," *NASPA [National Association of Student Personnel Administrators] Journal* 43 (2006): 83.

¹² Ishitani 873.

students already have to interact with staff members and further encourage the development of social and cultural capital.

7. Consider ways to strengthen support for families of first-generation students, perhaps in conjunction with the work of the Parents' Council, to ensure that programs and services for parents are "targeted" and "accessible," and then regularly evaluate those programs and services to ensure that they are meeting these criteria.¹³
8. Establish a first-generation advisory committee, facilitated by 3-4 first-generation students (sophomores, juniors, seniors), and advised by a first-generation faculty member and a first-generation staff member, to serve as a formal and structured resource for first-generation students. Feedback from focus group members suggests topics such as the following for the advisory committee's consideration: (a) making the transition from high school to college, (b) understanding the many areas in which academic advisers can be of help; (c) seeking assistance across campus—how and where; and (d) understanding specific academic processes, such as dropping a class or arranging for a course tutor.
9. Support first-generation students through the enhanced use of online resources:
 - Establish an anonymous on-line forum where first-generation students and others can ask questions on any number of topics, ranging from College policies and procedures to personal matters to Wooster rumors and folklore. Examples of such forums at other institutions include "Ask Uncle Ezra" at Cornell (<http://ezra.cornell.edu>), "Ask Charlotte" at Hartwick (<http://www.hartwick.edu/x12011.xml>), and "Ralphie's Guide to Student Life" at the University of Colorado (<http://studentlife.colorado.edu/ask-a-buff>).
 - Incorporate information of particular interest to first-generation students in the design of the new developmental advising website, to be launched in 2010-2011, and consult with Lisa Kastor and Thomas Tierney (co-chairs of the 2009-2010 Developmental Advising Task Force) in this process. As the site is developed and adapted to meet student needs, the Developmental Advising Committee members should consult relevant sources/groups to develop strategies for effectively disseminating the information to first-generation students.
10. Communicate with various campus constituencies, including those listed below, the findings of this report and the need to consider the backgrounds and perspectives of first-generation students as these groups go about their work at Wooster:
 - Faculty members;
 - Admissions staff;
 - Center for Diversity and Global Engagement staff;
 - Developmental Advising Committee;
 - Student Life staff;
 - Student leaders with peer mentoring responsibilities (e.g., resident assistants, teaching assistants, and peer mentors); and

¹³ ASHE 98.

- Campus supervisors who employ a large number of student employees: Admissions, Libraries, Information Technology, Security, and the Physical Education Center.

The actions suggested here should prove beneficial not only to first-generation students, but also to an array of campus constituencies. For example, on-line resources can better inform *all* students, faculty, and staff members. Likewise, professors and campus supervisors who understand the needs of first-generation students will find they can obtain better outcomes with these students, thereby helping first-generation students maximize their college experience, while simultaneously improving the overall quality of the classroom and campus workplace, respectively. Taking steps to improve Wooster's outreach to first-generation students is also in keeping with our core value of diversity and inclusivity, as well as our institution's commitment to social responsibility. Through the collaboration of varied constituencies—faculty, staff, student leaders, and first-generation students themselves—Wooster can enhance the experiences of our first-generation students and therein strengthen our institution as a whole.

Demographics of Focus Group/Interview Participants

Majors

Communication Studies-4
Economics-1
English-1
Geology-1
History-3
International Relations-1
Math-1
Neuroscience-1
Political Science/Russian-1
Psychology-3
Religious Studies-1
Sociology-1
Theatre-1
Undecided-1

Gender

Males-9
Females-12

Class Year

2010-8
2011-3
2012-7
2013-3

Ethnicity

Asian American-1*
African-2
African American-2
Caucasian American-16*

*1 Asian American student and 2 Caucasian American students were the children of immigrants.

Questions for Focus Groups and Interviews

While the following were the main questions for students in the two focus groups and in the one-on-one interviews, the facilitator/interviewer also made ample use of follow-up questions, depending on student responses.

Questions for First-Year/Sophomore Focus Groups

How did you decide to go to college?

Talk a little bit about your junior and senior year of high school. What led you to Wooster?

Who did you turn to for guidance/advice/support in your first year of college?

What obstacles to succeeding in college have you encountered? What strategies have you used to overcome those obstacles?

What can Wooster do to serve the needs of first-generation students better?

Questions for Junior/Senior Focus Groups

Who have you turned to for guidance/advice/support while at college? (Follow-up: Did this source of support change over time? How so?)

What obstacles to succeeding in college have you encountered? What strategies have you used to overcome those obstacles?

What can Wooster do to serve the needs of first-generation students better?

How do you gauge your progress at Wooster?

Questions for One-on-One Interviews

How did you decide to go to college?

How did you end up at Wooster?

From whom did you/have you sought guidance/advice/support?

What obstacles to succeeding in college have you encountered? What strategies have you used to overcome those obstacles?

What can Wooster do to serve the needs of first-generation students better?