Hearing First-Generation Students: Classroom Speech Practices and Academic Engagement among a Student Population at Risk[1]

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Abstract

College students whose parents did not attend college have significantly higher attrition rates than do continuing-generation college students. Understanding perceived opportunity for and acceptability of self-expression may enhance efforts to improve first-generation students' educational outcomes. Data from a U.S. national survey revealed college satisfaction positively correlated with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class. This correlation was significantly stronger for first-generation students, who were less likely to report expressing their ideas or opinions in class, despite being more likely to value being encouraged to do so. When first-generation students participate despite feeling uncomfortable, they are less likely than continuing-generation peers to report doing so despite thinking their opinions are important for others to hear.

Keywords: first-generation students, student engagement, college satisfaction, self-expression, classroom participation, student persistence

Introduction

In recent decades, higher education researchers have begun studying first-generation college students, focusing on their high attrition (Billson & Terry, 1982; Pratt & Skaggs, 1989; Richardson & Skinner, 1992; Ishitani, 2006) and group characteristics (Terenzini, et al., 1996). Qualitative studies by London (1989; 1992) and Stieha (2010) addressed social and cultural dislocation experienced by first-generation students attempting to reconcile family loyalties with academic aspirations. Lack of cultural capital hinders first-generation students in fully entering the college student role (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Group-conscious interventions can improve outcomes (Stephens, et al., 2014; 2015). Less well understood is how first-generation and continuing-generation students compare in engagement (Kuh, 2003).

Since its 2003 advent, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has included generational status. That first-generation college students ("first gens") differ from continuing-

generation students ("continuing gens") in precollege characteristics and experiences is undisputed; what educators and institutions could do to engage these students and improve their odds of academic success, by contrast, raises questions worth pursuing. Do first gens differ meaningfully in their quality of engagement? Are certain aspects of college experience especially important to address to improve first gens' educational outcomes?

Answers depend on the variables under consideration (e.g., college aspirations, involvement in extracurricular or co-curricular activities, and peer interactions; Pike & Kuh, 2005; NSSE, 2008, 2015; Pascarella, et al., 2004; Padgett, et al., 2012)—and on how one defines engagement. The literature has not yet captured how variables of engagement among first gens may change over time—or perhaps reflect the higher education climate of an era. Survey data from the University of California reveals that motivations, expectations, and attitudes of first gens in 2005 differed in important ways from those of students ten and twenty years earlier (Saenz, et al., 2005). Whereas, for example, parental encouragement and desire for financial success nearly doubled in importance, the proportion who agreed colleges should prohibit racist or sexist speech on campus declined slightly between 1995 and 2005 (while an increasing proportion of continuing gens agreed.)

Classroom speech climate—the norms and practices regarding self-expression and exchange of ideas in and out of the classroom—has yet to be factored into measures of engagement, but we think it should be. The extent to which students perceive their ideas and opinions as valued and validated may be an indicator of involvement in their own learning process and sense of belonging in a learning community (Rendon, 1994; Roehling, et al., 2011). First gens generally lack the social capital held by continuing gens, so they may merit special consideration owing to cultural disparities regarding the value of self-expression. We also recognize the power polarized political climates may exert over peer interactions in university settings, particularly class discussions, participation in campus activism, and the disparate impact such power may have on the speech practices, if not necessarily the private beliefs, of individuals across different student groups. Risk of self-censorship in "a hostile opinion environment" is likely as great in the midst of today's debate over microaggressions as it was during political correctness debates of twenty years ago (Hayes, et al., 2004, 277; Loury, 1994; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015; Zamudio-Suarez, 2016).

Our research questions are informed by the perspective that self-expression on college campuses is integral to student engagement and, by extension, contributes to intellectual development and academic success:

> 1. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall college experience satisfaction? If so, is the relationship between comfort sharing opinions and ideas with college experience satisfaction stronger for first-generation students?
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> 2. Does comfort expressing and sharing opinions and ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with college classes? And if so, is the relationship between comfort sharing opinions and ideas with satisfaction in college classes stronger for first-generation students?
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> 3. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with college activities? If so, are relationships between comfort sharing opinions and ideas in class with satisfaction in college activities stronger for first-generation students?

4. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in their willingness to express their opinions and ideas in uncomfortable class situations?
5. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in their perception of the value of their opinions and ideas to class discussion?
6. Are first-generation students more likely to consider expressing their ideas and opinions an important college experience goal?

We also note incidental findings potentially of interest when developing strategies to engage first-generation students.

Literature Review

Our thinking about college student engagement and persistence is guided by theoretical models developed by Astin (1984) and Tinto (1987). Working from the premise that the physical and psychological energy a student invests in studies, student organizations, and peer-faculty interactions constitute "involvement" in the academic experience, Astin (1984) saw institutions as largely responsible for devising policies to stimulate that energy. Tinto (1987) understood persistence as a function of social and academic integration, to which individual students and academic leadership contributed. Although neither singled out first gens as a group to study, Tinto (1998) in his later work identified non-residential institutions such as community colleges—still the primary gateway institution for many first gens, but one where, if integration is to happen, it is likely to happen solely in the classroom—as promising sites for cooperative learning.

Despite broad agreement that engagement should be a top priority, consensus defining engagement, much less achieving it, remains elusive. Effective educational practices for the five NSSE benchmarks encompassing various dimensions of undergraduate life emerge from student survey responses, ranging from time on task and paper length requirements, to items reflecting institutional commitment to inclusiveness and diversity, such as having a supportive campus environment, talking with students of different beliefs, values, or ethnicities, contributing to class discussions, and discussing ideas outside of class (NSSE, 2010). Some think these benchmarks are too broad and lack theoretical rigor (Steele & Fullagar, 2009; Burch, et al., 2016). Another objection is that urging students to engage implies assignation of accountability—though whether to institutions or students is unclear—when in reality, "Engagement may simply be the byproduct of a learning environment that suits the student" (Axelson & Flick, 2011, 42).

Key indicators suggest first gens are less engaged. Pike and Kuh (2005) found first gens were more likely to have lower educational aspirations, lower academic and social engagement, and less likely to perceive their campus environment as supportive. Padgett and colleagues (2012) found that as first-year students, first gens scored lower on measures of openness to diversity and on dimensions of psychological well-being that included positive sense of self and autonomy—results, they argued, which could be mitigated by increased interaction with peers and faculty. Strikingly, a recent study of first-generation college seniors found that at the liberal arts colleges studied, first gen seniors benefited equally with continuing gen seniors in terms of development of family life, civic engagement, interpersonal relationships, problem solving and overall intellectual development, and, consistent with the negative selection hypothesis (Brand & Xie, 2010) benefited more from institutional preparation for career paths (Dong, 2019). First-generation students who are able to engage benefit greatly from college education. The question remains how to promote

engagement and avoid the attrition that prevents many first-generation students from completing their educations.

Prescribing increased interactions may paradoxically shift responsibility for capitalizing on social opportunities in the first year of college onto a group among whose chief disadvantages are less cultural and social capital (Padgett, et al., 2012). Soria and Stebleton's (2012) regression models, which compared survey responses of first gens and continuing gens, addressed this issue, focusing on frequency of interactions with faculty, class discussion contributions, raising ideas and concepts from other courses during class, and asking "insightful" questions (680); on all these engagement and retention indicators, first gens scored lower. Stephens, et al. (2012) went further, proposing a "cultural mismatch theory" to explain patterns of underperformance. The problem, they explained, lies in a conflict between the culture of the American university itself, which has long reflected "pervasive middle-class norms of independence that are foundational to American society," and "working-class norms of interdependence" that first gens are more likely to have internalized (1180-1181). Universities impose models of self that presuppose a command of cultural norms alien to some students' pre-college life experiences: e.g., Stephens and colleagues (2012) quote a first gen focus group participant: "Neither of my parents went to college. So they never told me what to do in college because they didn't really know how to interact with teachers, speak up in class, and develop my own opinions" (1194).

Scant research addresses Tinto's observation about two-year colleges as potentially better equipped to engage by promoting "learning communities" (173). Over one-third of parent-dependent students enrolled at community colleges are first gens, while the proportion of first gens who began at two-year schools then earned a bachelor's degree within six years is less than half that of students with at least one parent with a four-year degree (Ma & Baum, 2016). The benchmark means report of the 2017 Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE, 2017) found students perceived their community colleges did well at providing support to succeed, but in reporting their own efforts revealed they only "sometimes" contributed to class discussion or made a presentation. McClenney (2007) noted in her analysis of CCSSE data that persistence and strength of engagement closely correlate even among high risk students (142). Interestingly, Pascarella and colleagues (2003) found that although first gens in community colleges lagged in scientific reasoning, openness to diversity, and learning for self-understanding, their writing skills tended to exceed those of other students—a discovery which, if generalizable, should give pause to researchers for whom "speech" is limited to spoken expression.

Method

Participants

Data were from a nonprobability sample of United States college students collected online by YouGov, an Internet-based data analytics and marketing research company, for the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonpartisan nonprofit in partial fulfillment of a grant provided by the John Templeton Foundation.

YouGov collected data from 1395 college students in their marketing panel, then, using a sampling frame based on demographic data, reduced the sample to 1250 individuals to better match demographics of U.S. college students. YouGov developed the sampling frame using 2013 U.S. college student population characteristics as described in a National Center for Education Statistics report (NCES; Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Of the participants, 442 (35.4%) reported that they did

not have a parent who had attended college (first gens); 775 (62%) reported having one or more parent who had attended college, and 33 (2.6%) did not know if a parent had attended college. For additional information on participant demographics, see Table 1.

Table 1: *Participants' Demographic Data*

n	%	Demographic Information
685	54.8	Identified as female
529	42.3	Identified as male
19	2.9	Identified as transgender
17	1.4	Identified gender as other
760	60.8	Identified as White
158	12.6	Identified as Black or African-American
183	14.6	Identified as Hispanic or Latino
4	0.3	Identified as Native American
7	0.6	Identified race or ethnicity as Other
391	31.3	Attended a 2-year institution
859	68.7	Attended a 4-year institution
957	76.6	Attended public colleges or universities
256	20.5	Attended private colleges or universities
37	3	Uncertain whether their schools were public or private
963	77	Attended full-time
287	23	Attended part-time
822	65.8	Age 18-24 (Traditional college-aged students)
229	18.3	Age 25-34
199	15.9	Age >=35

Materials and Procedure

Panel members meeting selection criteria (currently enrolled undergraduates living in the U.S.) had the opportunity to participate. Participants completed a 64-item survey (Full survey in

Naughton, 2017) aimed at understanding U.S. college students' opinions and attitudes regarding free expression on their campuses.

Participants received YouGov points, which can be accumulated toward rewards (e.g., tote bags and gift cards). Survey data were collected from May 25, 2017 to June 8, 2017. YouGov also provided data previously collected for use in YouGov research projects.

Harvard University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) determined that the project was IRB exempt.

Results

Analyses used unweighted data. For generational status analyses, we used data from the 1217 students who self-reported generational status.

1. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall college experience satisfaction?

We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between overall college satisfaction, as measured by the item "Overall, how satisfied are you with the experience you have had at your college or university" (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = unsatisfied, 4 = very unsatisfied) and responses to the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). Comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class significantly positively correlated with students' overall satisfaction with their college experience, $r = .376$, $N = 1250$, $p = 2e\text{-}43$.

We computed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for college experience satisfaction with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class for first-generation students; there was a significant positive correlation, $r = .438$, $n = 442$, $p = 4e\text{-}22$. For continuing-generation students, there also was a significant positive correlation, $r = .318$, $n = 775$, $p = 1e\text{-}19$. We conducted a Fisher's Z test to determine whether the difference in correlation was statistically significant; the difference was statistically significant, $Z = 2.348$, $p = .009$. The positive correlation between college satisfaction and comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class was significantly stronger for first-generation students.

2. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with college classes?

We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between college class satisfaction, as measured by the item "Overall, how satisfied are you with the classes you have taken at your college or university" (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = unsatisfied, 4 = very unsatisfied) and responses to the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). There was a significant positive correlation, $r = .372$, $N = 1250$, $p = 3e\text{-}42$. Comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class significantly positively correlated with students' overall satisfaction with classes.

We also computed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for class satisfaction with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class for first-generation students; there was a

significant positive correlation, r = .365, n = 442, *p* = 2e-15. For continuing-generation students, there also was a significant positive correlation, r = .281, n = 775, *p* = 2e-15. We conducted a Fisher's Z test to determine whether the difference in correlation was statistically significant; the difference was not statistically significant, although there was a trend for correlations to differ, Z = 1.57, *p* = .058.

3. Does comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class correlate with overall satisfaction with campus student activities?

We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient to assess the relationship between college class satisfaction, as measured by the item "Overall, how satisfied are you with the on-campus student activities at your college or university" (1 = very satisfied, 2 = satisfied, 3 = unsatisfied, 4 = very unsatisfied) and the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree). Comfort expressing opinions and sharing ideas in class significantly positively correlated with students' overall satisfaction with classes, r =.321, N = 1250, *p* = 2e-31.

We computed the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for satisfaction with campus student activities with comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class for first-generation students; there was a significant positive correlation, r = .365, n = 442, *p* = 2e-15. For continuing-generation students there also was a significant positive correlation, r = .281, n = 775, *p* = 2e-15. We conducted a Fisher's Z test to determine whether the difference in correlation was statistically significant; the difference was not statistically significant, although there was a trend for correlations to differ, Z = 1.57, *p* = .058.

4. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in their willingness to express their opinions and ideas in uncomfortable class situations?

We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between college students' generational status and whether they have expressed ideas and opinions in class discussions. The relationship between these variables was significant, X2 (2, N = 1217) = 16.56, *p* = .000047, v = .117. Of the first gens, 306/442 (69.2%) reported having expressed their ideas and opinions in class, and of the continuing gens, 617/775 (79.6%) reported having expressed their ideas and opinions in class. First gens were significantly less likely to have expressed ideas and opinions during classroom discussions.

The item "In my college classes, there are times when I share my ideas and opinions, even when I am uncomfortable doing so." (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree), was asked only of participants who reported disagreement with the item, "In my college classes, I feel comfortable sharing my ideas and opinions" (13.4%; 167/1250: strongly disagree = 128; disagree = 39). Of these 167 participants, a total of 96 (40 first-generation students; 53 continuing-generation students; 3 generational status unknown) endorsed sharing ideas and opinions even when uncomfortable doing so. Thus, 57% of students who reported being uncomfortable sharing ideas and opinions in class still shared ideas and opinions, at least sometimes.

5. Do first-generation students differ significantly from continuing-generation peers in their perception of the value of their opinions and ideas to class discussion?

We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether students endorsed "I thought my opinion was important for others to hear" as a reason they participate despite feeling uncomfortable. The relationship was significant, X2 (2, N = 93) = 9.31, p = .002, v = .316. Of the 40 first-generation college students who responded, 5 (12.5%) endorsed the item; of the 53 continuing-generation college students, 22 (41.5%) endorsed it. First gens were significantly less likely to report participating when uncomfortable even though they thought their opinions were important for others to hear.

We also conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether participants endorsed "I disagreed with what others were saying" as a reason they participate despite feeling uncomfortable. The relationship was significant, X2 (2, N= 93) = 5.17, p = .023, v = .236. Of the 40 first gens who responded, 9 (22.5%) endorsed the item; of the 53 continuing gens, 24 (45.2%) endorsed it. First gens were significantly less likely to report participating when uncomfortable because they disagreed with what others were saying.

6. Are first-generation students more likely to consider expressing their ideas and opinions an important college experience goal?

Participants read a list of fifteen possible college experience goals, from which they selected the three most important to them (see Table 2 for a complete list with selection frequency). "Learn specific skills and knowledge for my future career" was, by far, the most endorsed of the fifteen choices (58.4% of first gens; 60.1% of continuing gens).

Table 2: *Which of the Following are the Three <u>Most</u> <u>Important</u>
Things You Want to Gain from Your College Education?

Item	1st gen %	Cont. gen %	X2	p-value
1 Belong to a campus community where my values are shared.	7.5	6.7	.248	.62
2 Explore controversial issues using evidence-based claims.	9.5	7.6	1.32	.25
3 Grow and learn in a safe and comfortable environment.	25.6	23.5	.664	.42
4 Learn how to use gather and thoughtfully use evidence to support my claims.	14.5	18.2	2.77	.09
5 Better understand how to value diversity.	7.2	5.0	2.5	.11
6 Understand and evaluate the ideas of others, even when I disagree with them.	15.2	15.6	.045	.83
7 Learn how to turn controversial topics into meaningful dialogues.	8.4	7.2	.523	.47
8 Be encouraged to share my ideas openly.	11.8	8.1	4.35	.04
9 Be exposed to diverse intellectual viewpoints.	19.5	20.9	.363	.55
10 Explore career options for after college.	37.3	38.5	.15	.70

11 Develop my personal identity.	27.4	27.6	.01	.93
12 Learn specific skills and knowledge for my future career.	58.4	60.1	.36	.55
13 Meet people and develop friendships.	26.0	29.2	1.38	.24
14 Become a better analytical writer.	7.5	10.5	2.96	.09
15 See the world from someone else's perspective.	8.1	8.5	.05	.82

We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether participants endorsed "Be encouraged to share my ideas openly" as one of their three most important college experience goals. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2 $N = 1217$) $= 4.35$, $p = .037$, $v = .060$. Of the first gens, 52/390 (11.8%) endorsed it, whereas 63/712 (8.1%) continuing gens endorsed it. First gens were significantly more likely to endorse being encouraged to share their ideas as one of their most important college experience goals.
Additional Findings
Additional notable differences between first gens and continuing gens included differences in low priority college experiences; marital status; housing; and type of institution attended.

Low Priority Experiences

Participants also indicated which three of the list of possible college experience goals were least important to them. We performed a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and whether participants endorsed "Grow and learn in a safe and comfortable environment" as a low priority experience. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2, $N= 1217$) 10.04, $p = .002$, $v = .091$. Among first gens, 67/442 (15.2%) endorsed it as a low priority, relative to 176/775 (22.7%) of continuing gens. Thus, first gens were significantly less likely to consider growing and learning in a safe and comfortable environment to be a low priority.

Marital Status

We conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and marital status. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (4, $N= 1171$) 16.12, $p = .003$, $v = .117$. Among first gens, 318/442 (71.9%) had never been married; among continuing gens 620/749 (82.7%) had never been married. (For frequencies, see Table 3.)

Table 3: *Student Marital Status*

Marital Status	1st gen %	Cont. gen %
Married	15.8	12.3
Separated	1.3	2
Divorced	4.9	3

| Widowed | 1.3 | 3 |
| Never Married | 71.9 | 82.7 |

Although most college students had never been married, first gens were significantly more likely to have been or be married than were continuing gens.

Housing

We conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and housing. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (2, N= 1210) = 19.13, p =.00001, v = .126. 78/438 (17.8%) first gens reported living on campus; 222/772 (29.1%) continuing gens reported living on campus. First gens were significantly less likely to live on campus.

Type of Institution

We conducted a chi-square test of independence to examine the relationship between generational status and type of institution (two-year/community college versus four-year institution) attended. The relationship was significant, $X2$ (1, N = 1217) = 14.88, p = .0001, v = .111. 168/442 (38.0%) first gens reported attending a two-year/community college; 212/775 (27.4%) continuing gens reported attending a two-year/community college. First gens were significantly more likely than continuing gens to attend a community college.

Discussion & Implications

If the campus speech controversy is to be made meaningful within the sphere of higher education beyond yet another public relations crisis to be managed, it will be by recognizing free speech's role in fostering student engagement and intellectual development inside the classroom. It is important to appreciate that students' perceptions of the value of speech, including their own, may vary significantly across subpopulations. Advocating policies supporting free speech is insufficient; it also is essential to recognize that first-generation students may be less likely to express their ideas in a classroom setting in the first place, whatever the speech climate at their institution. Because of the correlation between students' comfort sharing opinions and ideas in class discussion with overall satisfaction with college classes and with their college experience, we think participation in class discussion should be included among factors considered in future engagement and persistence research.

Despite decades of scholarly attention to the dynamics of class discussion and participation, up to and including millennials (Karp & Yoels, 1976; Fassinger, 1995, 2000; Fritschner, 2000; Rocca, 2010; Roehling, et al., 2011), much remains unknown about how first gens negotiate this defining, enriching, and not infrequently contentious feature of the college experience. Our data suggested that while a positive correlation between comfort sharing ideas and opinions in class and their overall satisfaction with college appears slightly stronger among first gens by comparison with their continuing gens, significant differences emerged when actual behaviors were considered. That first gens in our sample not only were less likely to report having expressed their perspectives during discussion, but were less likely to overcome their reticence because they con-

sidered their opinions important, or in order to express disagreement, reveals substantially dissimilar classroom experiences for first gens. It was therefore striking to find first-generation students were marginally more likely to identify "Be encouraged to share my ideas openly" among their three most important college experience goals—suggesting a mismatch between first-generation students' college expectations and realities confronted in the classroom.

That continuing gens were far more likely to report contributing to class discussion because they felt their opinions "important for others to hear," suggests that differences in self-expression between the groups may extend to differences in self-assessment even before speech is exercised. In other words, if continuing gens feel their opinions are important to be shared, they might be expected to venture more confidently, and more often, into class discussions. Continuing gens may benefit from confidence in their opinions—more attention from instructors, greater opportunity for cognitive growth through dialogue and debate—but it does not necessarily follow that first gens, by default, hold their own ideas in low esteem, but rather, that only a minority succeed in finding a place for their perspective in the majority conversation. Are continuing gens, in this sense, analogous to "native speakers" in the college setting, endowed not only with cultural but linguistic capital? Does class discussion, as conventionally structured, privilege those endowments, and in turn, revalidate them?

Our findings carry policy implications for institutions committed to increasing diversity while strengthening engagement and retention. Academic leaders can recognize there is "more than one cultural model of how to be a student" (Stephens, et al., 2012), and that even institutional language we take for granted may have unintended effects—excluding students whose life experiences predispose them to cooperative, rather than competitive, styles of learning and participation. Targeted pre-matriculation interventions, such as faculty-led summer bridge programs and workshops, could help acculturate first gens to college classroom norms and dynamics (Martinez, et al., 2009). Properly designed and realized, such opportunities could challenge students to explore and experiment with different forms of discourse in group discussion settings, to articulate and gain confidence in their own ideas and opinions, much like the process of "cultivating voice" described by Jehangir (2009). As evidence seems to corroborate Tinto's (1993; 1998) hypothesis that the persistence of some students is largely a function of what happens in the classroom, it should not be assumed that our assumptions about the value of campus social activities hold true for all students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

Higher education institutions have long been criticized for reproducing social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, et al., 1994; Margolis, 2001; Tsui, 2003; Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). A central premise of critiques is that students enter college with unequal reserves of cultural capital, resulting in disparate academic outcomes. Although discussion of cultural capital theory is beyond the scope of this paper, our findings point to the role classroom discussions may play in mediating the self-expression of students whose pre-college experiences and influences may limit their ability to access discourse conventions of "college classroom talk" (Brooks, 2016). Given the importance assigned by respondents to college culture encouraging the open expression of ideas, and the positive correlation that emerged between students' comfort expressing themselves in class and their overall satisfaction with college and classroom experience, indications that first gens are behind their peers in actual participation are cause for concern. What is less clear is the degree to which their reported reticence results from classroom speech climate. Not all non-participation can be attributed solely to a shortage of verbal capital, and indeed, the two items that emerged as significantly less likely to be selected by first gens as reasons to speak despite discomfort during class discussion—belief in the importance of one's opinion and disagreement

with what others are saying—differ in the discursive contexts to which they might apply. How we interpret the reluctance to speak—a lack of self-efficacy or an act of self-censorship—is a matter for further research.

Privilege plays a role: First gens were significantly less likely to devalue growing and learning in a safe environment. This difference could indicate the buffering effect social privilege may provide continuing gens, who may have less experience with being in physically unsafe environments and be more likely to perceive that they can return home to a comfortable environment if necessary. On-campus housing may result in a higher degree of engagement, and reduce time spent on household responsibilities (e.g., cooking and cleaning,) but typically is more expensive. First gens are significantly more likely to attend less costly two-year/community colleges. Although most students are unmarried, first gen are more likely to be married than are continuing gens, so when developing programs for promoting student engagement, strategies for including married students merit consideration.

Limitations

Because the data were cross-sectional, one cannot infer how important class discussion behaviors are to first gens' academic persistence. Also, just as it is not our intention to suggest that participation in class discussion alone determines the quality of engagement for any particular individual, neither are we claiming that generational status by itself determines students' willingness to express their opinions during class discussion. The survey elicited student perspectives on classroom speech experiences generally; data are not disaggregated to distinguish, for example, class discussions in a "low consensus" humanities course from a "high consensus" STEM course.

In some regards, individuals who participate in marketing research panels significantly differ from individuals who do not. According to a Pew Research Center report (Kennedy et al., 2016,) samples for online nonprobability surveys include a disproportionate percentage of participants who take an interest in political or civic matters, which may impact generalizability of findings. Online non-probability samples are especially prone to error/limited generalizability for findings regarding Black and Hispanic populations, although this may be less of a problem sampling adults who have more formal education (Kennedy et al., 2016). Furthermore, there were only four Native American participants, making the subsample too small to meaningfully consider. Further research is especially warranted to examine attitudes and opinions of Students of Color.

The sample is of college students in the United States, and because of differing laws, cultural norms, and other factors, findings may not generalize to other populations.

Future Directions

Fostering a campus environment in which first gens feel their voices matter begins in the classroom. Instructors who lead class discussions and rely on strong student participation should consider incorporating elements of a "learning partnership" model (see Baxter-Magolda, 2004) which, by situating learning in the student's experience and validating their ability to construct knowledge, positions the student to become the "author" of their intellectual and personal growth (42). Four-year institutions can consider following the lead of community colleges in taking public speaking seriously as a curricular offering, a discrepancy noted by Klosko (2006). Public speaking courses offer students the opportunity to develop fundamental rhetorical skills and confidence in self-expression.

Colleges and universities could signal institutional support of first-generation students by sponsoring events like the First Generation College Celebration Day spearheaded in 2017 by the Council for Opportunity in Education and the Center for First-Generation Student Success and observed by partnering institutions around the country with guest speakers, mentoring sessions, and inclusive programs (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2018). Another possibility is to develop a first semester course for first gens in which students experience mentoring, build community, and gain familiarity with campus resources and opportunities.

To better hear first-generation students, and to help first-generation students develop their voices on campus, we recommend:

- Rendon's (1994) validation model of student learning is powerful: Faculty should embrace their role as a student's potentially most important "validating agent," taking the effort to learn the cultural histories of their students and incorporate multiple perspectives into the class environment, and "to liberate students to express themselves openly even in the face of uncertainty" (47).
- Stephens' et al.'s (2015) difference-education intervention strategy offers first gens who have persisted the opportunity to make a difference for incoming first gens by delivering oral presentations on their transitions to and through college— narratives which may emphasize rather than downplay the working-class backgrounds of some presenters. Much of the power of this empirically-validated strategy stems from its public speaking format.
- Institutional approaches to building first gens' cultural capital are wide-ranging, and many are in development. "Carrot and stick" strategies may push students to take advantage of culturally broadening opportunities (Lederman, 2013).
- While a discussion of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on postsecondary institutions is beyond the scope of this paper, the large-scale shift to distance learning necessitated by the crisis may have exacerbated existing disparities between first gen students and continuing gen students because of differences in access to and proficiency using digital tools (Soria et al. 2020; also see Goudeau, et al., 2021). Conversely, platforms such as Zoom may improve access because of removing obstacles to attendance and also may change the dynamics of participation in discussions. These are open areas of inquiry.

The disparities we found in classroom speech attitudes and practices between first gens and continuing gens warrant further inquiry. To what extent can attitudes and practices be attributed to pre-college experiences—academic, familial, communal, or some combination thereof? To what extent are they a function of campus-specific speech climate, classroom dynamics, or institutional type? How first-generation students choose to participate in class discussion may comprise a small part of their overall engagement strategy, and perhaps compensatory academic experiences contribute no less significantly than self-expression to cognitive and personal growth (Pascarella et al., 2004). Although discomfort in the classroom can be productive, it also can be destructive (Taylor & Baker, 2019), and in our study, discomfort differentially impacts students, more greatly inhibiting first gens from participating.

Although our findings do not call into doubt the wisdom of mandatory class participation, they should make educators more sensitive to, if not necessarily accommodating of, demographic variables at play in any class discussion. This, in turn, should prompt greater reflection: What do

we mean by class discussion? Do we value the contribution of all participants equally, and if not, why not?

The subject of classroom speech is relative: One person's speech, it could be argued, may be another's microaggression—a controversial and impactful higher education topic outside the focus of this paper (Sue et al., 2007; Kanter et al., 2017; Lilienfeld, 2017; Sue, 2017). The issue of trigger warnings, too, has generated extended debate over best classroom practices, with some positing trigger warnings help achieve equal access for students who have PTSD, provide informed consent for discussion of outcomes of oppression and marginality, and are a matter of basic decency and respect (Rae, 2016; Gavin-Hebert, 2017; Karasek, 2016,), while others worry trigger warnings may be growth-inhibiting, unintentionally promote a view of women as psychologically fragile, and that students needing trigger warnings should be provided PTSD treatment (Vatz, 2016; Doll, 2017; McNally, 2016). As both microaggressions and trigger warnings are closely associated with classroom instruction and interaction (Morris, 2015; Lester, at al., 2017; Knox, 2017), whether they intersect with and impact student speech practices—and if so, how—is a question of substantive contemporary importance, with implications for scholarship, instruction, and policy.

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