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## **Starting from Scratch: Building College Cultural Capital for First-Generation College Students at Dickinson**

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Starting from Scratch:  
Building College Cultural Capital for  
First-Generation College Students at Dickinson

Kaitlin Mae Irvine  
Anthropology Senior Thesis

ANTH 400: Senior Colloquium  
Professor Ann Hill  
28 April 2010

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## Introduction

“The resources just were not there! And the money was not there. The cultural capital was not there. There was no one to push you. When people found out that I was going to a four-year *private* school, they were like, ‘Where’s Dickinson? Oh my God! It costs \$46,000 a year?! Wait you have that much money!?’ And I’m like, ‘No!! You know I don’t!’ But that just shows you that even though that specific resource wasn’t there, I fished to go get it. It’s attainable and I just want people to know whether you’re first-generation or not, this opportunity, you can achieve it.” – Kelly, senior at Dickinson College

“When I saw that there was *nothing* [support programs for first-generation college students] here, I was surprised. But I mean, not at the same time because it’s a private school, it’s really expensive, so they just don’t expect that a lot of people are going to be first-generation.” – Emily, sophomore at Dickinson College

“As a community, Dickinson is committed to recruiting the most socially, ethnically, and economically diverse student body possible. The college has a proud tradition as an educator of first-generation college students. Today, about 11% of Dickinson students are of the first generation in their family to attend college.” - Dickinson Academic Bulletin

According to the 2000 census, only 24% of adults aged twenty-five and older held a college degree in the United States (Bauman and Graf 2003:1). In a country that claims to provide the opportunity for those who work hard to achieve their dreams, many individuals struggle to attain success, often due to the social class into which they are born and its accompanying educational inequality. While in the recent past a college degree was a luxury and not necessary to secure a job, it is almost a requirement in today’s proverbial “land of opportunity.” This harsh fact continues to bring a population of first-generation college students to institutions of higher education across the United States in the hopes that specialized knowledge and a college degree will lead to a better-paying job and potential upward mobility.

The process of entering college and succeeding once there is challenging for all students, but can be particularly difficult for first-generation college students, who come from families in which *neither* parent has graduated from college. Not surprisingly, many first-generation college students come from working-class and lower socioeconomic backgrounds, because educational attainment is impacted by the ability to pay for higher education, and most higher paying jobs require a college degree. A vicious cycle develops that is difficult to escape. Not only do first-generation students fight to reach the next educational level, they also struggle because they lack

the *college cultural capital* taken for granted by many of their fellow students whose parents have graduated from college. Building upon twentieth-century sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, my concept of college cultural capital is the idea that resources for and knowledge about the college process are like capital assets that are passed down from generation to generation. College cultural capital includes knowledge about applying to college, registering for classes, the classroom setting, and the jargon of higher education, among other things. Because they cannot use their parents as a reference guide for navigating the college process and often come from underfunded high schools without the resources, first-generation college students lack this college cultural capital. While *undoubtedly* intellectually capable of achieving their goals and attaining higher education, first-generation college students need support once they arrive at college to build this specific set of cultural capital. Institutions of higher learning can help in this process by being more aware and supportive of this demographic.

Dickinson College is a small, private liberal arts college located in central Pennsylvania. As stated above, 11% of the current student body self-identifies as first-generation, and yet no specific support structure exists. Based on my own qualitative research on first-generation college students at Dickinson and the available literature on the topic, I argue two interconnected points: that first-generation college students lack the college cultural capital possessed by their continuing-generation peers *and* that colleges should provide support for first-generation college students as a way to build this capital. Ultimately, I offer specific suggestions for Dickinson based on the responses and enthusiasm of the participants in my study, who were receptive to the idea of a mentorship program for first-generation college students at Dickinson. Other suggestions include encouraging better self-reporting of first-generation status, increasing dialogue about social class on campus, and displaying Dickinson first-generation college student

success. By making the changes I suggest, Dickinson can provide the support that my research has found first-generation college students need and want, and similar institutions can apply my work to their first-generation populations.

## **Significance**

### *Anthropological Significance*

Since its inception as a discipline, anthropology has focused on the exotic and the “Other,” which has often been found and studied outside of the United States (Sax 1998). However, with fewer and fewer undiscovered places left in the world, anthropologists have more recently turned to their own communities to find the “Other.” While there has not been significant research within the discipline of anthropology on first-generation college students, the field offers perspectives and analytical tools that can now be applied to this demographic. In essence, first-generation college students can be viewed as the “Other” in the American higher education system, marginalized by a system designed for and by the higher socioeconomic classes and which favors that particular set of cultural capital. However, while they lack college cultural capital, first-generation college students bring with them their own cultural capital, positive behavior and attitudes that reflect their own class experiences. My research can be considered applied anthropology, something useful to the discipline and also to the school, because it ultimately provides suggestions for change. By offering support and opportunities for further educational success to first-generation college students, it also addresses and attempts to combat the educational inequality that exists and continues to grow in the United States as a result of social class.

### *Significance for Dickinson*

“In the early parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, mid parts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, [he] went out to the coal-mining areas of PA, and really interested a lot of students to come to Dickinson. So, Dickinson, unlike some of the other prestigious liberal arts colleges around the country, really had a disproportionately high number of first-generation students in our midst.” – James, senior administrator at Dickinson, referring to a former Dean of Admissions

As mentioned in the introduction, Dickinson College, located in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, is a small, private, selective four-year liberal arts college. Founded in 1773, Dickinson offers a variety of academic courses of study and prides itself on its low student-faculty ratios, small class sizes and the tight-knit community that is possible at a school of less than 2,500 students. The College draws students primarily from Pennsylvania, the Northeast, and the Mid-Atlantic region (Dickinson College Quick Facts). As one of the first colleges in the United States, Dickinson has a long history of educating first-generation college students, and continues to do so today. However, because of the costs and the link between first-generation status and social class, we do not tend to think there would be a significant population of first-generation college students at a school like Dickinson.

While currently, 11% of the Dickinson student body self-identifies as being first-generation college students (Dickinson Academic Bulletin), it is reasonable to think that there are more students who neglect to self-report. However, even with this sizable population, there is currently no support structure to help build the college cultural capital of first-generation college students on campus, perhaps because the College does not want to “Other” this demographic, or because social class is not always acknowledged. In the past few decades, efforts have been made to diversify the campus based on racial composition, and so there are mentorship programs geared toward students of color, who because of the overlap of race and class, are often first-generation. However, these programs do not cover everyone who is first-generation, and it is important to realize that diversity is not simply found in race, but also social class. As the

College continues to diversify its populations, economic diversity will play a large role, and having a support structure in place can help immensely.

While research has been conducted on race and class at Dickinson, I am the first student to study first-generation college students on campus. My research sheds light on the experiences of first-generation college students at Dickinson and identifies what can be done to help these students achieve and excel while at this institution without completely setting them apart. It provides specific suggestions for how to offer support for first-generation college students at Dickinson to continue and better the College's rich tradition of providing education for this group. By highlighting social class, it can contribute to its more recent efforts to diversify the student body. I believe that it can also be applied to other liberal arts colleges and small schools, or at least contribute to the small body of literature specifically focusing on schools like Dickinson.

### *Personal Significance*

While not a first-generation college student myself, as a counselor for the Upward Bound program throughout my college summers, I have worked extensively with low-income high school students who will be the first in their family to attend college. A federally-funded pre-college program, Upward Bound helps to provide these students with the best preparation for the college setting, experience on a college campus and access to the resources to get to college and succeed once there. However, not all first-generation college-bound high school students have the opportunity to be a part of an Upward Bound or other similar programs. Many do not live in areas where one exists and others may not realize its importance. Programs like Upward Bound help to build up college cultural capital that first-generation students lack prior to their college years. Support structures at the college level can serve a similar purpose, particularly for

students who did not have the opportunity to participate in an Upward Bound or a similar program in high school. This research is important to me because the results can help students, like those I with whom I have spent the past few summers, to find the support and the cultural capital they need to succeed in higher education.

### **Review of the Literature**

There is not a large body of literature on the topic of first-generation college students, probably because the term was not used until the past few decades. The majority of the literature that does exist comprises quantitative studies pertaining to college readiness, entrance, retention and graduation rates. Psychologists and higher education professionals have conducted research mainly at community colleges or large state schools, thus neglecting schools like Dickinson. In the last ten years, some qualitative research has been conducted, expressing interest in the narratives and experiences of first-generation college students and offering suggestions on what can be done to provide support to this demographic. All of my sources besides Bourdieu were published within the last ten years, thus verifying the recent addition of qualitative studies.

My research differs from published studies in that it takes the next step: I did qualitative research in the form of interviews at a specific school and offer suggestions on what it can do to better support its particular population of first-generation college students. Furthermore, the suggestions I make are informed by the people they would affect: first-generation college students themselves. I made a point to ask students what they would want in terms of support, an aspect that none of the authors of the literature I read did in their studies.

The literature on first-generation college students can be categorized according to broad similarities. There is some writing that talks specifically about cultural capital for first-generation college students (e.g. Lundberg 2007), but the majority of studies, whether

intentionally or not, focus on students' lack of preparation (e.g. Byrd and MacDonald 2005).

There are two dominant approaches that emerge in the qualitative studies: those which highlight what first-generation college students lack compared to continuing generation college students, and those that focus on what first-generation college students bring with them and what contributes to their success (e.g. Rood 2009, Oldfield 2007). A more recent theme in the literature (e.g. Cushman 2006, Oldfield 2007, and Merritt 2008) focuses on using current first-generation college students' experiences to provide advice to incoming students, as well as institutions and educational policymakers. I have chosen a few articles from each trend to highlight in this review of the literature.

### *Cultural Capital*

Although he did not specifically focus on first-generation college students, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively about the French educational system and its favoritism toward the cultural capital of students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Bourdieu defined cultural capital as the “factors which define the positions of different classes with regard to the school system...[which can be] converted and cashed at every stage of the school career” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:87), and found a “direct relation between possession of cultural capital and degree of success” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:74). In his writing, Bourdieu asserts that the cultural capital favored in higher education is that of the higher socioeconomic status, which makes sense considering that the system was created by and for this group. Thus, students from working-class backgrounds are at a disadvantage from the beginning because of their lack of this specific cultural capital due to the social class into which they were born. Bourdieu's work was crucial for my research and serves as the framework for what I have termed *college*

*cultural capital*. I will discuss Bourdieu at greater length in the discussion section, but it is necessary to mention his influential work here to understand more recent authors.

While little of the available literature focuses specifically on cultural capital among first-generation college students, Bourdieu's influence can be seen in the works of Carol Lundberg and Anat Gofen, who write specifically about immaterial forms of capital. Lundberg (2007), a professor of higher education at Azusa Pacific University, actually writes about cultural capital and compares being a first-generation college student to being a baseball rookie – both lack the knowledge of the game. Like Bourdieu, she recognizes the disadvantage placed on first-generation college students by the educational system, saying:

“The ways in which students who enter college with less cultural capital are disadvantaged, not through their ability or their commitment but through having less access to relationships and sources that foster success simply because the people involved understand higher education and can help students negotiate their way through an often complex maze. That disadvantage can be lessened when faculty and student affairs professionals share their capital with first-generation students.” (Lundberg 2007:9)

She emphasizes the importance for first-generation college students in having a mentor who has completed the process, noting that interactions with mentors on college campuses help to “compensate for first-generation students’ lack of cultural capital” (Lundberg 2007:9). Her insight into mentor relations influenced my interview questions and helped me to formulate the ideas I provide in the suggestions section of this paper.

Anat Gofen (2009) focused on family capital, finding that for college success, it is necessary that students’ families place a high priority on education. He acknowledges family support as part of the capital that first-generation college students lack. However, this does not match up to the results of my study, where in the majority of cases, the students and faculty/administrators expressed that while their parents did not know about college, they provided emotional and some financial support. Only one participant mentioned that her family did not emphasize educational attainment or support her at all once she pursued a college degree.

Overall, many of the participants talked about how their families did not necessarily relate to them or their experience, but that they were a driving support throughout their education, which contradicts Gofen's findings.

### *Strengths vs. Deficits*

Based on the literature, the two primary approaches to studying first-generation college students are the strengths model and the deficits model. Robert Rood, a higher education researcher, and Kenneth Oldfield, a professor and first-generation college student/graduate, represent these two approaches. Rood (2009) studied the first-generation college student experience through personal narratives at a small, private Christian college in the Northeast. Using background literature, statistical evidence, and first-hand interviews with twelve students, he identified three main factors that contributed to first-generation success at the school: faith, faculty, and family. Additionally, instead of emphasizing their lack of cultural capital, he uses the strengths approach, stressing the ways first-generation college students find and use their resources, personal drive, and aspirations for upward mobility to achieve success. This relates to the themes I found in interviews with Dickinson students pertaining to their strong sense of intention and personal drive.

Kenneth Oldfield (2007) uses his own experience as a first-generation college student to argue that there are certain skills and knowledge that first-generation college students lack. He stresses the importance of focusing primarily on the deficits of first-generation college students in order to best understand their experiences and provide support. He opposes Rood in that he represents the deficits model. Additionally, Oldfield goes one step further than Rood – he does not just identify factors, but provides concrete suggestions for solutions, including a first-generation student center on campus and a mentorship program. This was influential in my

creation of a suggestions section for my thesis. Also helpful was his definition of cultural capital in the college context: the “knowledge, skills, education and other advantages a person has that make the educational system a comfortable, familiar environment in which he or she can succeed easily” (Oldfield 2007:2). I was able to incorporate much of what he said into my discussion of college cultural capital.

After reading both authors, it seems that a combination of these two approaches is the best way to study first-generation college students and their experiences. While it is important to note what first-generation college students lack in order to best support them once in college, it is equally important to focus on what they bring with them, particularly the sense of intention and value for education. In using a combined strengths and deficits model, thus coupling Rood and Oldfield’s approaches, a comprehensive understanding of first-generation college student experiences can be reached and guidance can be best provided to help support what they already bring with them. This is what I seek to do with my suggestions.

#### *Voices of First-Generation College Students*

A recent trend in the literature has been to use the experiences of first-generation college students and graduates to provide suggestions and guides for incoming students. Kathleen Cushman, in her 2006 book *First in the Family: Advice about College from First-Generation Students*, uses the experiences of first-generation college students to create an accessible guidebook. As a journalist and documentarian, Cushman works to bring to the forefront the voices of youth, and incorporates generous quotes from interviews with first-generation college students to identify the college cultural capital that they need.

She focuses an entire chapter on building relationships once at college, mentioning that not everyone seeks out help or knows where to look for it, which is something that surfaced in

my interviews. Particularly at a college like Dickinson, which has many resources to offer all students, it can seem so decentralized that it is hard to navigate them all. She emphasizes the importance of each student having someone on campus with whom they feel comfortable talking about their academic and social background. Not only does Cushman's work offer a different perspective, it has very practical application as an accessible how-to guide for first-generation college students. Additionally, her interviewees come from a range of institutions, thus offering diversity of opinion. The practicality of Cushman's work was crucial to my research, as was her inclusion of quotes from students, an approach I mimic in my discussion section. However, Cushman's work is not very analytical, but rather informative – simply sharing the information.

#### *College Readiness for First-Generation College Students*

Kathleen Byrd and Ginger MacDonald's 2005 study of college readiness factors was a pivotal article for my research. They qualitatively studied older first-generation college students at community colleges to identify what the students themselves considered essential skills for college success. Like Rood, they wanted to understand first-generation students' strengths and not just deficits. Byrd and MacDonald found that first-generation college students develop strengths like determination and strong work ethic through the life experiences that they bring with them to college (Byrd and MacDonald 2005:32). They found that participants were goal-oriented, but did not necessarily know the college process, and so needed support in order to navigate their new surroundings. Interestingly, they note that "individual student characteristics upon entry into college may have contributed to student success" (Byrd and MacDonald 2005:24); several of my interview participants mentioned their outgoing personality or strong drive as helping them, and this correlates with Bourdieu's findings of exceptional qualities helping working-class students succeed.

They note that it is important to “recommend programs and support for first-generation students to understand the college system and college culture,” and that “advising is likely to be even more important for first-generation college students” since they do not have family members who can provide guidance (Byrd and MacDonald 2005:35). The needed skills they identified included academic skills (writing at the college level, reading, computer skills), time management skills, focus on a goal, and the “ability to self-advocate” (Byrd and MacDonald 2005:33) in order to navigate the system. In my interviews, I found that college readiness, particularly in terms of academic skills was not as much of a concern to the first-generation college students at Dickinson. Knowledge of the system was what they really felt that they lacked.

#### *What Colleges Can Do*

A more recent trend in the literature is offering suggestions for what colleges can do to promote first-generation college student success. In focusing on what first-generation college students lack, Kenneth Oldfield (2007), mentioned above, offers suggestions on ways that colleges can better accommodate by developing support systems for this demographic and talking about social class on campus (Oldfield 2007: 8-11). Similarly, Corrinne Merritt (2008) emphasizes the role the institution itself can and should play in helping first-generation college students meet success. She highlights how recent studies have shown that “first-generation college students lack the cultural and social capital necessary to make a smooth transition from secondary education” (Merritt 2008:49), and offers a list of suggestions for colleges to make the transition process easier for this demographic. She stresses the importance of “enlightening the teaching faculty” about the first-generation college student population at each particular institution, the needs they might have and how the faculty can then assist them or incorporate

their experiences and cultural capital into the classroom setting (Merritt 2008:50).

Additionally, she suggests that colleges provide first-generation students with the tools to navigate the college system and “make use of such resources as financial aid, writing and academic support services, tutoring services and peer assistance programs” (Merritt 2008:51), which relates to the theme that emerged from my interviews regarding the decentralization of resources at Dickinson. Interesting and applicable to my thesis is her suggestion that colleges should “seek to hire administrators, faculty and staff representative of the student demographics who could be role models, mentors and advisors” (Merritt 2008:51). This coheres well with my idea of a mentorship program, which I will discuss in the suggestions section. Oldfield and Merritt were important sources for my research and influenced my decision to include the prominent suggestions section.

## **Methodology**

### *Qualitative Research: One-on-one Interviews*

In order to understand the experiences and needs of first-generation college students at Dickinson, I conducted qualitative research using 20-40 minute, one-on-one interviews with seven students and five faculty/administrators who all had been or would be the first generation in their family to graduate from college. As with most research involving semi-structured interviews, the most difficult part was identifying and finding participants. This was especially difficult for my project, because from the initial admissions application to the continuous institutional surveys, first-generation college students at Dickinson are self-reported. This means that they usually check a small box or color in the circle saying “yes” next to the question of “Are you a first-generation college student?” or answer questions on a financial aid form regarding parental education. The reliability of these numbers is questionable; some first-

generation college students may not know about the term or identify with it, and consequently not self-report. Furthermore, personal information that is collected is confidential, listed on financial aid and admissions applications, and therefore the names of students or faculty/administrators were not available to a student researcher like myself. To compensate for this, I employed two main recruitment strategies.

### *Recruitment Strategies*

After a complete review of the literature and approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Dickinson, my biggest fear in moving forward with my research was that I would not find anyone willing to share their experience as a first-generation college student with me. Luckily, this turned out not to be the case. Since I could not simply obtain a list of first-generation college students due to privacy agreements, I used two primary methods to generate my sample. I began by using the age-old method of word-of-mouth; because of my interest in my project, I found myself talking about it quite often. I found about half of my participants in this way, which I attribute to being a student at Dickinson and knowing other students and faculty/administrators. My second technique employed an advertisement in Dickinson College's weekly email newsletter, *The Compass*, which appeared over the course of several weeks (see Appendix A). I was pleasantly surprised by the response I received and the willingness of students and faculty/administrators to participate. I found the other half of my study group in this way.

### *Convenient Sample*

The study sample consisted of seven current students and five faculty/administrators. I did not have a truly random sample; it was more of a convenience group: people I knew and people who read my advertisement and contacted me. Through email communication, students,

faculty and administrators who responded with an interest in being interviewed were asked the clarifying question of whether or not they were a first-generation college student. I clearly defined this term as a student from a family where neither parent graduated from college. Of all those interviewed, only one participant had a parent who had begun college but never finished; for the others, neither parent had been at all. Only one student participant had an older sibling in college and on track to graduate.

Of the seven students, three were female and four were male. There were four sophomores, one junior and two seniors. One of the sophomore female participants transferred to Dickinson College at the beginning of her sophomore year, and had been involved in a first-generation support program at her previous school. Of the five faculty/administrators, three were female and two were male. The diversity that exists within my sample was not planned. While the majority of participants (four of the students and all five faculty/administrators) were white, one student was Indian-American, one was African-American and one was Hispanic. This is interesting considering that many people tend to think of first-generation college students as minorities because of the overlap between race and social class. The racial composition of my convenient sample is fairly representative of the Dickinson student population: students of color compose 16% of the student body (Dickinson College Quick Facts), a small percentage just like in my study. Two participants, both racial minorities, were part of mentorship programs on campus that are traditionally comprised of students of color.

It is important to emphasize again that diversity does not just fall along racial lines, and can come from geographic location. Of the seven students interviewed, three identified as being from urban areas, three from suburban and one from a rural area. Of the five faculty/administrators, one identified as urban, one as suburban and three as rural. Within my

sample, all but one participant identified himself or herself, without being asked specifically, as coming from a low-income background, thus linking first-generation college student status to social class. Short biographies of each of my participants can be found in Appendix C.

### *The Interview Process*

For student interviews, I requested private library study rooms, which were a convenient and central location for all students. For faculty/administrator interviews, I asked to use the individual's office as the location of the interview. Before the 20-40 minute interview began, participants were asked to read and sign a consent form, which detailed the purpose of the study and the use of a pseudonym instead of their real name when using anything they said in my thesis. I began with the question of whether they were indeed first-generation, and provided the definition to clarify. I asked questions from a prepared list, ranging from family upbringing to college preparation in high school to their experiences as a first-generation college student at Dickinson (See Appendix B). The questions were slightly altered for faculty/administrators whom I interviewed, but followed the same general pattern.

While many of the participants could provide an answer to the questions posed without needing clarification, there were a few participants who required more prompting to answer particular questions. One question that tended to elicit some confusion asked "Do you identify yourself as a first-generation college student?" Whether they had never thought of it as an identity before or were unfamiliar with the term, there was sometimes a need for clarification. Some interviews led to further, unscripted questions. For example, four students had been part of specific pre-college preparation programs designed for first-generation college students. Further questions included "Could you tell me more about the structure of the program?" or "Where do you think you would be today without your involvement in that program?" Overall

the interviews ranged from about 20-40 minutes and were informal and relaxed. I tried particularly in student interviews to create a level of comfort by sharing my own experiences with financial aid and my observations of, and shock at, the display of wealth at Dickinson.

### *Transcription and Data Analysis*

Data analysis included detailed transcription of all interviews I conducted using transcribing software and a foot pedal. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant while transcriptions were being completed, so as to maintain the confidentiality required by the IRB. Once the transcriptions were complete, I identified themes among the participants' responses, which comprise the majority of the discussion section of this paper. I used Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as a basis for interpretation of the qualitative research I conducted. I also compared my findings against the existing literature on first-generation college students' experiences to make suggestions for Dickinson's context.

### *Limitations to the Study*

As stated above, my sample was one of convenience, and therefore cannot be assumed representative of all first-generation college students. However, I do think that it is fairly representative of Dickinson College's first-generation college student population. Dickinson is a predominantly white school, and so it makes sense that my sample would have a majority of white participants. There are certain limits to my study; although I tried to set all biases aside, the fact that I, the researcher, am a white, middle-class continuing-generation college student may have influenced my question-writing and interpretation of the data. Because my sample was convenient, my study should not be taken as the final word on first-generation college students' need for support. However, I feel confident that it is a good start and produced solid

suggestions for what can be done to provide support and build college cultural capital for first-generation college students at Dickinson.

## **Discussion**

In this section, I discuss at length Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and the intersections of social class and educational attainment, which I then apply to my concept of college cultural capital. Also included are the themes that emerged from my interviews, highlighted by quotes from the students and faculty/administrators who participated. The concept of college cultural capital and the themes that I identified greatly inform the suggestion section at the end of this paper.

### *Theoretical Framework: Pierre Bourdieu's Cultural Capital*

“An educational system based on a traditional type of pedagogy can fulfill its function of inculcation only so long as it addresses itself to students equipped with the linguistic and cultural capital – and the capacity to invest it profitably – which the system presupposes and consecrates without ever expressly demanding it and without methodically transmitting it. It follows that, for such a system, the real test is not so much the number as the social quality of its public.” – Pierre Bourdieu, French sociologist, *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture*, 1977:99.

As mentioned briefly in the literature review, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote extensively on working-class students within the French educational system. Bourdieu prioritized social class in his writings, saying that it should not “be considered as a factor capable of *directly* determining practices, attitudes and opinions at every moment in the biography” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:88 emphasis added), but should absolutely be weighed in thoughts on the topic. He is known for his theory of symbolic violence, the idea that “social hierarchy and social inequality, as well as the suffering that they cause, are produced and maintained less by physical force than by forms of symbolic domination” (Schubert 2008:183). He asserts that this symbolic violence occurs within the educational system against students who lack certain cultural capital, a concept for which Bourdieu is often credited. Cultural capital extends the common monetary definition of “capital” to immaterial forms. Whereas economic capital is a

specific amount, including income, savings and property, cultural capital focuses on qualifications, resource accessibility and knowledge (Crossley 2008:89). While everyone possesses it, the composition of a particular person's capital varies depending on their social class, and this helps to explain power relations and inequality. Just as with economic capital, cultural capital is passed down from generation to generation.

Bourdieu defined cultural capital as the “factors which define the positions of different classes with regard to the school system...[which can be] converted and cashed at every stage of the school career” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:87), and found a “direct relation between possession of cultural capital and degree of success” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:74). Through quantitative studies, Bourdieu showed that possession or lack of certain cultural capital brings advantage or disadvantage, depending on the group (Moore 2008:104). He found strong inequalities within the educational system in regards to which groups continue on to post-secondary education. In *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* (1977), he asserted that students from wealthier backgrounds have the cultural capital, the knowledge and habits, valued within the educational system, because the system was created by and for the upper and middle class.

As a result, students from these wealthier backgrounds are more likely to succeed because they are recognized within the system and know how to work it. Additionally, the language of higher education is that of the higher socioeconomic classes, and so students from that background possess the linguistic capital, the jargon and vocabulary, to navigate the institution. However, in favoring wealthier students, the educational system simultaneously exerts symbolic violence against those who do not fit into this category – the working-class French students. They are discriminated against in the system, because they lack the cultural

capital due to their life chances, social class and upbringing. While he notes that since the mid-1900s, there has been an increase in the number of working-class students at universities in France, Bourdieu says they are still discriminated against and that the educational system continues to favor the upper class because of its nature (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:224). He asserted that the working-class students who reach higher education have been able to do so because they “manifest exceptional qualities in order to be channeled in this direction and persist in it” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:83) and that they have had to fight every step of the way to stay there.

### *Social Class and Education*

“Someone with a higher class background is typically better-educated: a person with a higher class background has increased access to a higher level of education, and someone with a higher level of education can then access jobs with higher pay and prestige.” - Melissa Moreland 2009:4.

Post-secondary education is costly, and traditionally, it is the children of those who have accumulated wealth over time, most likely because they have a college degree and its accompanying higher income, who are afforded the opportunity to attend and graduate from college. As a result, many first-generation college students, largely because their parents did not have the opportunity of college or a higher-paying job, come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. While not all do, and we should not assume this of any particular students, it was the case within my sample group – all but one participant self-identified as low-income. It is also important to note that because educational attainment is linked with socioeconomic status, racial minorities who have faced institutional discrimination in education and employment in the United States are overly represented in the lower socioeconomic level and therefore, many of today’s first-generation college students are minorities (Engle and Tinto 2008:8)

First-generation college students, typically from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, may not have the same academic and social preparation for college that other students do. Since

public schools are funded by local taxes, lower-income areas have significantly poorer public education than prosperous areas. At under-funded high schools, courses may not be as academically rigorous and not prepare students for college-level academics. Additionally, guidance offices sometimes lack the staff, resources and knowledge about the college process, which sets first-generation college students at an even greater disadvantage. As a result of their family and educational backgrounds, first-generation college students lack the specific set of knowledge and cultural capital that is favored in academia, the college cultural capital of their continuing-generation peers.

### *“College” Cultural Capital*

“Pierre Bourdieu explains that even when low-SES [socioeconomic status] students are qualified for admission to highly selective schools, they often lack the cultural capital to apply.” – Kenneth Oldfield 2007:3

Using Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, I have focused on first-generation college students, and use the term *college cultural capital* to mean the knowledge and resources that ensure college success for all students, from initial application to graduation. Examples of this capital include knowing how to apply for financial aid, register for courses, and navigate the campus environment. College cultural capital also includes the language and jargon of higher education; terms including FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), Registrar, class dean and work-study are largely unfamiliar to students without college cultural capital. Bourdieu separates linguistic capital, or the knowledge of the language of the institution, from cultural capital as a separate immaterial form of assets, but I find it important to incorporate linguistic capital into the concept of college cultural capital because it emerged in some of the themes from participant interviews.

If a student’s parents have completed college, those parents can pass down the knowledge about the college process to their children. First-generation college students lack this

knowledge, this college cultural capital, since neither of their parents have graduated from college. They cannot be expected to simply *have* college cultural capital upon enrollment; it must be acquired and grown. Unlike economic capital, which can occur instantaneously via a paycheck or winning the lottery, cultural capital must be built up over time. This can occur if the right opportunities are presented. In order to provide the opportunity to build college cultural capital, support structures, like mentorship programs, must be put into place to specifically help first-generation college students through the college experience, including transition to and navigation of the four years of uncharted territory that is ahead of them. As I have mentioned above, college cultural capital does not stop at the application stage, but is needed throughout the college process. As a result of the themes I have identified in my interviews with first-generation college students and faculty/administrators at Dickinson, it is evident that an optional mentorship program would be well received at Dickinson College. Additionally, the institution can make simple changes to increase the visibility of first-generation students on campus and help with their college success without completely setting them apart as the educational “Other.”

### *Themes in the Interviews*

There are certain similarities in the experiences of the first-generation college students at Dickinson. In this section, I identify these trends, incorporating quotes and relating the findings to the literature reviewed above. The following trends emerged in my interviews: the identity and invisibility of first-generation college students at Dickinson, their sense of intention and duty, the difference between supportive parents and parents who can relate to college experiences, college readiness, the reaction to the display of wealth, and the decentralization of resources. The final part of this section focuses on trends pertaining to mentorship and support relations on the Dickinson College campus, which greatly inform the suggestions I make at the

end of my thesis and are crucial in building college cultural capital for first-generation college students.

### Identity and Invisibility

“It’s [first-generation status] pretty widely known I think, especially when I say, ‘Oh, my parents aren’t too familiar with this process.’ So I just say, ‘I’m a first-generation student, so I’m taking on responsibility now.’” – Zachary, sophomore at Dickinson College

“I don’t think I’ve ever really thought about it until you told me you were writing about this. I don’t know that that’s something I talk about openly that much, I don’t even know that it’s really something I think about.” – Milo, senior at Dickinson College

“I just feel like it [being first-generation] isn’t even acknowledged here. Yeah, well I wouldn’t even know. I mean I’m sure there aren’t a *lot* but that doesn’t mean that we’re not here.” - Emily, sophomore at Dickinson College

A crucial question, and one of the first I asked in my interviews, dealt with first-generation identity recognition, which varied significantly among my participants. For some of my participants, first-generation college student status is something they think about often and share openly with other people. Cynthia, a Dickinson staff member, recognized her status as “a source of pride.” Zachary’s response, that he recognized he was first-generation and shared his identity with peers, and Cynthia’s response that she found pride in her status were somewhat rare within my sample. Their identities as first-generation college students were highly salient.

Other students said that while they identified themselves as first-generation, their status did not often present itself in conversation, and so they did not openly discuss it with others, making their identity mildly salient. Perceptions about social class at Dickinson because of the cost of attendance, as well as the thought that there were few first-generation college students or people who could relate, prevented these conversations and kept the identity somewhat repressed.

Still others had never considered it at all, personally or in a group setting, like Milo. Prior to my research, Milo had never thought of himself as a first-generation college student. He

attributed this to his high school, which gave him access to the resources many first-generation college students lack. Similarly, neither James nor Ted, both faculty/administrators, identified themselves during their college years as first-generation; the term was not widely used then. Today, James identifies himself in personal and group settings as first-generation, whereas Ted still does not talk about it much. For these participants, it was not a salient part of their identity.

Towards the end of each student interview, when discussing their Dickinson experience, I would casually mention that 11% of the Dickinson student population self-identifies as first-generation. Every single one of my student participants was shocked by this percentage, as were most of the faculty/administrators. Although they may identify as a first-generation college student on an individual level, on a more public level or not at all, every participant expressed a concern about the invisibility of first-generation college students at Dickinson. Since first-generation college student status is correlated with social class, and social class is not a constant topic of conversation at Dickinson, students felt that it was easy to blend in and ignore their class background on campus. One participant, Justin, addressed the issue of social class in his interview, saying, “I don’t know, it’s [being first-generation] not something people talk about, because...you can kind of associate it with class, and class is not something people talk about.” Many students do not want to put themselves on the line and draw attention to difference. The ability to blend in perpetuates the invisibility of first-generation college students because they are unable to know who else is first-generation just by looking at them.

However, as is the case with Zachary and Cynthia, first-generation college student status should be a source of pride and commended. If social class was a more frequent topic of conversation, then first-generation college students would be more likely to seek visibility and not feel stigmatized by their social class. Visibility would increase the saliency of identity and

pride of first-generation college student status. Eagerness to self-identify and be visible would likely translate to excitement and willingness to take advantage of support and mentorship resources on campus to help build college cultural capital among first-generation college students. I will discuss suggestions for increasing conversation of social class and acknowledgement of first-generation college students at Dickinson in the upcoming suggestions section.

### Sense of Intention and Duty

“It’s a sense of urgency, a sense of seriousness, not dull seriousness, but a sense of intention. This is a big thing: you’re changing the dynamic of your family.” – James, administrator at Dickinson College

“Actually related to the first-generation thing, I really want to go back to my high school, I want to teach there at least for a little bit because I want to give back to my high school what it gave to me, and it means a lot to me for me to be there because I really enjoy the place and it’s my community and it’s something I’m really comfortable with, so it’s something I really want to do, is go back to MY city and teach there.” – Zachary, sophomore at Dickinson College

“I *do* do it for my parents, too. Because even though I’m paying for it on my own, I want them to see that I’m going to do it and I can. Because I know that they would help me if they could, so I guess yeah, that’s part of it.” – Emily, sophomore at Dickinson College

A theme that was very apparent in my interviews was first-generation college students’ sense of intention and duty in regards to their education and goals. It was evident that they were not at Dickinson to drink and party all the time; they were focused on their academics and getting their diploma. The students I interviewed were very goal-oriented and ambitious, something that Byrd and MacDonald (2005) identified in their study. This sense of intention and goal-oriented nature can be seen as part of the cultural capital that first-generation college students bring with them, and helps to, in a way, compensate for their lack of college cultural capital.

College was not a given for them, and therefore they were not going to jeopardize their position. Their motivation drives them to excel and complete college for their families, as Emily noted, and also for themselves. Because of the heightened appreciation that first-generation

college students have for their education, they often feel a need, like Zachary did, to give back to the communities and families who helped them, and to assist future first-generation college students or others who have not had the same opportunities.

### Parental Support vs. Parental Understanding

“If I tell my parents what I’m doing in college, I feel like they’re...humoring me. Like they really don’t know what I’m talking about, ‘cause they’ve never experienced it, so they don’t know what it means to be in the Student Union...if I tell my mom or my dad, it’s like, ‘Where is that? What does that mean?’” – Justin, junior at Dickinson College

“I don’t think she [his mother] understands the intense amount of work and the intense amount of pressure that I’m under. – Milo, senior at Dickinson College

All but one of the participants recognized a distinct difference between receiving support from their parents and having parents be able to relate to what they were going through. While their families may not understand the pressures and experiences of college, which can create tensions upon returning home (Moreland 2009), they nonetheless encourage the success of their first-generation college student. This stems from the emphasis the parents of first-generation college students place on education. Whereas in most of the literature, like Gofen (2009), researchers identify first-generation college students as lacking family support, this was not true within my study sample except for Evelyn. Her family stopped communicating with her when she decided to pursue higher education because they felt she would look down on them for their lack of education. All other students and faculty/administrators felt supported by their parents in their college decisions and experiences; in fact, most students said that they speak with their parents on a regular basis. However, they recognized that their parents could not relate to what they were going through, having never been in the same position. While a mentorship program to build cultural capital would not negate the support of the parent, it would help to provide a person who could not only support but also relate to the student. In my suggestions section, I also offer the idea of including a specific section for first-generation college students and their

parents on the College website, which could help parents to understand Dickinson better and provide access to resources for students. [most students related that they spoke with their parents on a very regular basis...]

### College Readiness

“My high school, not gonna lie, the writing curriculum absolutely sucked, so I came in with horrible writing skills, but worked through it.” – Michael, sophomore at Dickinson College

“I came in here not knowing how to write a MLA-style paper. I credit her [specific professor] for molding me into the writer that I am. Because she sat me down, she said, “I know where you come from and that’s not your fault.” And I said, “It’s not, is it?!” And I can’t help that the teachers didn’t emphasize this because it really wasn’t expected for you to go to college, they just gave you the basic skills you needed to survive in a low-paying job. So coming in here and being so far behind but catching up at such a quick pace, I feel really blessed to have this opportunity to be here at Dickinson.” – Kelly, senior at Dickinson College

“Most of the programs that offer support for first-generation students are remediation. And you don’t that problem at a school like ours, because it’s selective admission, not open admission.” – Evelyn, administrator at Dickinson College

As evidenced by the quotes above, there were certain academic skills that some of the participants lacked coming in to Dickinson, owing to their high school experiences. Writing skills were the most mentioned college readiness skill students found themselves lacking when they started college coursework; Kelly, Zachary and Michael all felt behind in their writing level because of inadequate high school preparation. However, as Michael says, they worked through it and professors helped them to get their writing level up to par. Overall, though, the college readiness skills Byrd and MacDonald (2005) identified, including reading, writing and time-management, were not a struggle for Dickinson’s first-generation college students any more so than for their peers. Participants who had been involved in any sort of pre-college preparatory program that helped to build cultural capital expressed that they would not be where they were today [at Dickinson] without it and that the program had helped to build their skills.

Most participants did not feel that they lacked the academic preparation for Dickinson or that their academic transition was significantly different from continuing-generation students.

After all, they had gone through the application process, done well in their high schools and on college entrance exams like the SAT, and graduated from high school. As a selective liberal-arts college, Dickinson does not simply accept every student who applies; those who are accepted, including first-generation college students, are accepted based primarily on their academic record. Something that many of the student participants felt unprepared for was the classroom structure at Dickinson. They were used to lecture-based classes, and face a challenge at a school where the grade in many classes depends on participation. This is part of college cultural capital and the knowledge of how to navigate the college setting. Zachary mentioned that he felt that having some sort of mentor on campus would be beneficial because they could provide information on classroom settings and talk with first-generation college students during their transition to this type of coursework.

Again, it is important to note that first-generation college students, though lacking college cultural capital, do not lack the ambition or the ability to succeed, and this is further demonstrated by the success of my participants. Because of Dickinson's selective admissions process, I believe that my findings on college readiness should only be applied to Dickinson and other similar liberal arts schools; perhaps at a larger institution, the college readiness of first-generation college students would be more similar to those mentioned in Byrd and MacDonald's article.

### Culture Shock: Display of Wealth

"I remember I went to the Health Center and they were like, 'Well how can we bill your parents,' and I was like, 'Can you do it on my account?' And they were like, 'Oh you mean charge so they'll get the bill?' and I was like, 'No, like my HUB [campus mail] box,' and so I ended up having to be like, 'I AM PAYING FOR THIS SO HOW CAN THIS HAPPEN?!'" – Emily, sophomore at Dickinson College

"I don't fall for the hype. I know I'm not the only girl here who doesn't own a pair of Uggs, and that was another thing – the Uggs. They're just like, in your face and if you didn't have these shoes you just were not on the Dickinson level." – Kelly, senior at Dickinson College

While the participants of my study did not feel unprepared academically for Dickinson, many felt culture shock in the social atmosphere and consumer culture on campus. As mentioned above, many first-generation college students come from lower-income backgrounds. All of my participants except for one student self-identified as coming from a lower-income background, without being prompted to say anything on the subject. Six of the seven student participants mentioned being shocked by the display of wealth at Dickinson College. A private school, Dickinson's total cost for the 2010-2011 academic year will be \$51,950, which includes tuition and room and board (Dickinson College Annual Fees). While 61% of students receive some form of financial aid (Dickinson College Quick Facts), there are definitely students who can and do pay the full amount.

Social class and possession of wealth are easy to spot based on the products that many students buy. First-generation college students were struck by the emphasis many other students placed on brand names. To a certain extent, some brand names (Uggs, Lilly Pulitzer, Coach, etc.) should be added to the college cultural capital of Dickinson, because this jargon, this linguistic capital, is needed to navigate Dickinson College. In addition to brand names, student participants also mentioned the ability and virtual carelessness of some students, presumably from higher socioeconomic statuses, to simply charge any extra expense home to their parents. Emily mentioned how it bothers her when campus offices ask her if she wants to charge something to her account or to her parents, because she knows that she will be the one paying for it. She pointed out that because higher education is designed by and for the higher socioeconomic classes, campus offices just assume the students will send the bill to their parents, not thinking that some students are footing the bill themselves and might want to pay upfront.

If there was more of a community and increased visibility of first-generation college students, upperclassmen might be able to alert new students about the meanings of certain language like brand names, and in this way build the linguistic part of Dickinson's college cultural capital. Additionally, if a mentorship program was in place, mentors would be able to listen to and talk with students about any difficulties they may be facing in adjusting to this aspect of the social atmosphere.

### Decentralization of Resources and Difficulty Self-Advocating

“Like here, when I have a question I have to ask like five different people and I have to figure out who they are and know what, and there's a lot of disconnect.” – Emily, sophomore at Dickinson College

A less frequent but important theme I found in my study was the feeling that the resources on campus are not centrally located. As Emily mentioned, if students are willing to seek out or want help, they do not necessarily know where to look for it because everything is spread out. Students emphasized that Dickinson has many resources to offer, but they went through a sort of trial and error process to get to them. As a result, first-generation college students at Dickinson did not know how to best self-advocate to get the support and access to resources they needed, which matches with Byrd and MacDonald's (2005) findings. An example given was the Financial Aid office; set off from academic buildings and the student union, many students do not know where it is located or what services are offered there. Linguistic capital also plays into this difficulty self-advocating; as mentioned in the college cultural capital section, specific office names may be unfamiliar to a student whose parents did not graduate from college and cannot serve as a reference guide. Academic advising, class deans, the Career Center, and the Campus Life office are all valuable resources that can be largely unfamiliar to first-generation college students.

Not knowing how to self-advocate or find resources seems to be the biggest lack of college cultural capital, and can be most detrimental to students' success. Kenneth Oldfield (2007) suggested a specific resource and support center specifically designed for first-generation college students, but after conducting interviews, I feel that this would "Other" first-generation college students and set them apart too much, which they do not want. Rather, an optional mentorship program could solve this issue of decentralized resources by providing first-generation college students with a mentor who could help them to navigate the maze of wonderful resources Dickinson has to offer. Additionally, if a specific part of the College website was devoted to first-generation college students and these resources were listed and better defined, students would be able to more easily find them and receive the support they need.

### Mentorship and Support on Campus

"I would have wanted a mentor who was highly accomplished, and I don't want to just talk to them, I want to know how do you move through all this and I want to see someone talking to me who's done it and done it really well." - James, administrator at Dickinson College

"I think it would have been nice just to have someone to ask questions." – Ashley, sophomore at Dickinson College

"I feel that it would help me ease into the process of college and what it means to be a college student in general, you know. And so, it would make me be on a similar level as everybody else, in that matter."  
– Zachary, sophomore at Dickinson College

Oftentimes, first-generation college students lack a concrete mentor in their lives who understands the college experience and can provide guidance, and this absence can heighten the challenges and culture shock of college. A crucial end question in my interviews dealt with the potential benefits of having a support program with mentors on Dickinson's campus specifically geared towards first-generation college students, designed to build the college cultural capital they lack coming into the institution. Students and faculty/administrators were receptive to a mentorship/support program of some sort. While some questioned whether they would have

used it, they thought that having an optional program in place would be a nice service, and some were adamant about how it would have helped them and that they hoped to see it in the future.

Student participants said that even though they were provided with their first-year seminar professor as an advisor the summer before their first year, many echoed Justin's sentiment that he "did *not* identify with [his] first-year seminar professor at all!" All interview participants were enthusiastic about being a mentor for an underclassman should such a support program exist, because, as Emily said, "it's so hard here to find people who understand." They also emphasized the importance of a program existing to acknowledge that there are indeed first-generation college students at Dickinson, thus increasing the visibility discussed above. However, they felt it was important that the program be optional – requiring it was seen as separating the specific demographic and really "Othering" them. I will further discuss my suggestion of a mentorship program in the following section.

### **Suggestions for Change at Dickinson**

"This is why this college is moving so fast, there's this real ambition, there's this real pure first-generation history." –James, administrator at Dickinson College

When I first set out to write this thesis, I wanted what I discovered to be helpful to first-generation college students and to Dickinson College. In short, I wanted it to be applied anthropology, something useful and not just a document that would be buried in a drawer. As my research evolved and I conducted interviews and did background reading, it became evident that changes could be made to the campus culture at Dickinson to make the transition easier for first-generation college students. These changes would not only help to build college cultural capital but also address some of the other themes that emerged in my interviews. The changes I propose are not difficult or costly, and after speaking with first-generation students and faculty/administrators, I believe they are changes that would be well received among the first-

generation college student population at Dickinson. Some of the suggestions I set forth maintain the invisibility of first-generation college students while others would make them more visible, thus exposing social class, something often hidden within the limestone walls of Dickinson. All of the following suggestions in some way contribute to the building of college cultural capital for first-generation college students by providing access to resources, support and the knowledge needed to navigate the college process.

1) **Encourage first-generation college students to self-report.** Statistics on the number of first-generation college students in higher education or enrolled at a particular institution are unreliable. This stems from frequent uncertainty over who exactly qualifies as first-generation and also from the stigma perceived to be attached to this identification, due to social class. If class was a more usual topic of conversation and if schools like Dickinson followed my suggestions and acknowledged first-generation students on campus, perhaps students would feel more comfortable self-reporting and understand why they should. If institutions had better statistics on the quantity of first-generation college students on campus, then they would be more able and perhaps willing to provide the necessary support to build college cultural capital.

2) **Increase dialogue about social class.** As mentioned above, while not all first-generation college students are from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, many are, including the vast majority of my research participants. At a private school like Dickinson with a high-tuition price compared to state schools or community colleges, it is often incorrectly assumed that everyone is from an upper-class background, drives a Land Rover and has five designer purses. This is simply not the case. At Dickinson, 61% of students receive financial aid, and yet, this fact and its relation to social class are not discussed. Unless you take a sociology or American studies course, you may never discuss class at Dickinson. In essence, it has become taboo to talk about

class, much like it was to talk about race not too long ago. While we do not need to call huge attention to first-generation college students as a group at Dickinson, perhaps increasing the dialogue about social class, and particularly social class at Dickinson, would give first-generation college students a forum to relate their life experiences and cultural capital to the college setting (Oldfield 2007: 8). One way to achieve this would be to require all students to take a course that focuses on class and race as part of the graduation requirements. Currently, there are certain requirements that could be fulfilled with a course on these topics, but there are other courses that can be substituted. Requiring a course with a social class focus would be a step in the right direction.

3) **Give every incoming first-generation college student a reference guide.** It would be very easy to provide a copy of Kathleen Cushman's book *First in the Family*, discussed in the literature review section above, to every first-generation college student who accepts admission to Dickinson. This could be sent out over the summer before their first year as a "how-to" guide of what to expect and how to navigate the college setting. Of course, in order to do this, more attention would need to be given to sections of the admissions application and financial aid forms that recognize first-generation college student status, so as to identify who was indeed first-generation and should receive the book.

4) **Display Dickinson first-generation college student success.** Similar to the current "Women at Dickinson" exhibit in the College library archives, an exhibit exposing the success of Dickinson alumni who were first-generation college students/graduates could be created. I must give credit to James for this idea, as he suggested it during his interview. The exhibit would help increase the visibility of social class and first-generation college students at Dickinson without

naming names. It could also work to break down any stigmas surrounding social class that may exist.

5) **Dedicate a special section on the College's website to first-generation scholars at Dickinson.** Some colleges make a section for first-generation college students a central part of their website, and it would be a very effective change to make. It could include links to various offices and resources on campus, including information about the FAFSA, how to choose courses, and other knowledge about the college process. Additionally, it could include information on the history of first-generation college students at Dickinson and success stories of Dickinson alumni who were first-generation. By providing this knowledge, a webpage would function to build college cultural capital for first-generation college students. It would also be a helpful tool for parents so that they could learn more about the college process and be better able to understand their child's experiences.

6) **Create a mentorship program for first-generation college students at Dickinson.** After careful reading and in-depth qualitative research of first-generation college student experiences at Dickinson College, I believe that there is a need for a support program for this group on campus. It would not focus on remediation, as many programs do, because Dickinson students claimed that they did not struggle too much academically. Instead, it would serve as a centralized point from which first-generation college students can learn about and take advantage of the many resources available on campus, and in doing so build up their college cultural capital. Ultimately, it would be more than a support program, and would go beyond a special section on the college website – it would provide a mentor for any first-generation college student who wanted one. Mentors would know about the college process and be able to help students apply for financial aid, register for classes, and talk about their experiences. After

interviewing students, I think it is best to put an optional program into place, where students who identified as first-generation on their admissions application would be offered the opportunity to have a mentor with their acceptance letter. Mentors should be faculty/administrators or upperclassmen who are first-generation college students/graduates themselves, so that they are accomplished and yet able to relate to their mentee's experiences, something parents cannot do. All participants were interested in serving as a mentor to a first-generation college student.

### **Conclusions**

After countless hours of background reading, interviews, transcribing and writing, I have been able to create suggestions that I sincerely hope can make a difference for first-generation college students at Dickinson and other institutions. First-generation college students are and will continue to make up a sizable percentage of Dickinson's student body because of the necessity of a college degree to acquire a well-paying job in today's society. Because of this, it is important to understand their deficits (Oldfield 2007), what they lack in college cultural capital, in order to best provide support for their college success. While I originally wanted to simply identify what I have termed *college cultural capital* and suggest a mentorship program for Dickinson to implement, so much more emerged.

Using Bourdieu's framework and my personal interviews with Dickinson students and faculty/administrators, my research shows that first-generation college students lack knowledge about and resources for the college process often due to their social class and the fact that their parents cannot serve as a reference guide. However, it also shows that this college cultural capital can be acquired, and one way to do this is by providing support at the college level. Incorporating the themes that emerged in my interviews with first-generation college students

and faculty/administrators, I have provided suggestions that can make the acquisition of college cultural capital possible for this demographic, as well as increase its visibility.

At the same time, it is crucial to examine the strengths of first-generation college students (Rood 2009). Several strengths surfaced in my interviews, but what did not come across in my research, possibly because of the way my interview questions were formulated, was how much these students bring to Dickinson. Their sense of intention, constant awareness of the value of education in a place where so many students take it for granted, and personal drive to achieve help them to succeed even with the lack of support. This was not necessarily apparent from my study. I was uncomfortable with the reliance on the deficits model that emerged from my research because it seems to further “Other” first-generation students.

Of course, my research should not be taken as the final word on first-generation college students at Dickinson, and it would be ideal if another study focused on first-generation strengths could be conducted. More studies should be undertaken at schools similar to Dickinson to contribute to the literature on first-generation student experiences. However, I do feel that the results of my research are strong enough to encourage the implementation of my suggestions. In the future, I hope that first-generation college students will find pride in their achievements and a community among other students from similar backgrounds, and be able to find the support they need to build their college cultural capital.

### **Acknowledgements**

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interest in and concern for first-generation and working-class college students. This thesis would not have been possible without the willingness of Dickinson students and faculty/administrators to share their stories with me in the form of interviews. They were invaluable to this research. I would also like to thank Tim Malloy, director of the Frostburg State University Upward Bound, for his continual support of all I do and literature suggestions on the topic. I cannot forget my parents and grandparents, who have instilled in me the value of education and helped me to be (and pay for) where I am today – I could not have done this without their support. Lastly, without my incredible students and co-workers from Upward Bound, I would never have found my passion of working with first-generation college-bound high school students or chosen this topic for my senior thesis. I hope that whatever college my students decide upon, there are support structures for them that will help them to achieve their dreams, because they absolutely deserve it.

## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Email Newsletter Advertisement*

As shown in Dickinson College's weekly email newsletter, The Compass:

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#### *First-Generation College Student Interviews*

Looking for first-generation college students at Dickinson to interview about their college experiences for anthropology senior thesis. Interviews will be about an hour and will be scheduled at the convenience of the participant. Student must be the first in their family to attend college (neither parent graduated from college). Any faculty or staff who work with first-generation college students or were themselves first-generation are welcome, too. Please contact Kaitlin Irvine at [kaitlin.irvine@gmail.com](mailto:kaitlin.irvine@gmail.com) or 304-676-4708 if interested.

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#### *Appendix B: Interview Questions*

The actual interviews consisted of these questions, but as they were semi-structured and open-ended often prompted further questions. Many of these questions were derived from the literature on the topic.

1. Are you the first in your family to go to college?
2. Do you identify yourself as a first-generation college student? Do others know this about you? Why/Why not?
3. Can you tell me about your family background and upbringing? Where are you from?
4. Was education a priority in your family? Did your parents/family/guardians emphasize the importance of going to college? Did you ever doubt that you would go to college?
5. What experiences in your life, things you've been involved in, have gotten you to where you are today?
6. What are your educational goals? What is your major, why did you choose it, and what do you plan to do with it?
7. When did you first take the SAT?
8. Why did you want to go to college?
9. Why did you choose Dickinson?
10. What has your experience been like at Dickinson and do you think your first-generation status has impacted that? Do you think it is different than continuing-generation students?

11. What keeps you going/motivated to succeed?
12. What are you involved in at school? Do you work on or off-campus?
13. How do you find the academic and social spheres at Dickinson? Did you have difficulty adjusting? What were these difficulties?
14. Do you receive support (emotional, financial, etc.) from off-campus sources like your family?
15. Do you feel supported on campus? Who supports you? Do you have any sort of official or unofficial mentor?
16. Do you think you would have/could benefit from some type of support network at Dickinson that would pair first-generation students with either a peer or faculty/administrator from a similar background?

### *Appendix C: Participant Biographies*

In order to show the diversity within my sample, I have included a short biography of each participant. They are all people who have worked hard to be where they are and find their way through the maze of college, and should be given much credit. They were invaluable to my research.

#### Students

- Zachary is an Indian-American sophomore mathematics major with a double minor in education and Japanese. He grew up as a first-generation American in an urban area of Pennsylvania, and was part of the pre-college program Talent Search, specifically designed to help first-generation college-bound high school students through the college application process. He hopes to become a mathematics teacher and give back to the community that got him to where he is today.
- Michael is a white sophomore English major from suburban Maine. During high school, he participated in the pre-college program Upward Bound, which helped him adjust to college courses and lifestyle. He works in Dining Services, volunteers at a community after-school program, and is considering working for Upward Bound in the future.
- Ashley is a white sophomore physics major with an astronomy minor. A musical enthusiast, Ashley grew up on her family's farm in rural PA and has always loved reading and school.

She credits her high school Spanish teacher with helping her get through the college application process. She is actively involved in musical groups on campus and works in Dining Services and as a Teacher's Assistant.

- Emily is a white sophomore transfer student majoring in Environmental Studies. At her previous school, a large university near where she grew up in suburban Colorado, Emily was part of a first-generation scholars program that linked her with an advisor who helped with financial aid and navigating the college setting. At Dickinson, she is involved in a singing group and her sorority and holds an off-campus job to pay her way through school. She feels somewhat lost without her advisor and wishes there was a similar program at Dickinson.
- Kelly is an African-American senior psychology major and a member of the Philadelphia Futures scholar and support program for motivated inner-city youth. She grew up in urban Philadelphia and went to a school that “was so bad it doesn't exist anymore.” She has made the most of her Dickinson experience by becoming involved in several clubs, conducting research and studying abroad for a semester. Without her Philly Futures mentor, she does not know where she would be.
- Justin is a Hispanic junior law and policy major who attended a magnet school for half of high school. Hailing from California, Justin is a member of the POSSE Scholars program for promising youth from inner cities. His POSSE mentor helped him greatly with the transition to life at Dickinson. He is involved in student government, studied abroad and recently spent spring break on a service trip. He is excited for his educational policy internship this summer in Washington, D.C.
- Milo is a white senior law and policy major from suburban Philadelphia, who did not identify himself as a first-generation college student prior to this research. Milo has taken advantage of his Dickinson experience by becoming involved in student government and spending a semester interning in the nation's capital. He plans to attend law school after graduation and hopes to be able to really help people as a lawyer.

#### Faculty/Administrators

- Ted is a social science professor at Dickinson who grew up in urban Maryland and attended the nearby state school for his undergraduate studies. He decided to go to college because he did not know what he wanted to do, and without support at his university, he did not discover it until his senior year. Now, his research interests include working-class culture.

- James is a white administrator who attended Dickinson as a first-generation college student. His parents saved money and lived modestly so that he would be “the one” to graduate from college. Originally from upstate New York, he did not identify as first-generation when he was a student at Dickinson. He sees providing support for first-generation students as vital and encourages the College’s tradition of providing educational opportunities to this demographic.
- Susan is a white career counselor who grew up rural central Pennsylvania and attended a small liberal arts college . She struggled with choosing the right major when in college, but found that with the support of the career counselor and her work-study supervisor, she was able to find her niche. Today, she works to help all students find their paths.
- Cynthia is a white financial operations staff member originally from a rural area of Pennsylvania. A graduate of a liberal arts college, she credits her personal drive with her success in college and claims that her outgoing personality helped her to get involved and flourish while there and seek out the help she needed.
- Evelyn is a white administrator who grew up in a very rural area of central Pennsylvania. She was a non-traditional first-generation college student at Dickinson, and has since worked her way up to her high administrative position. She is very interested in the experiences of first-generation college students, particularly at Dickinson.

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