

“Not Your Typical Student”

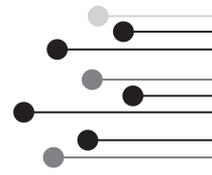
The Social Construction of the “First-Generation” College Student

Tina Wildhagen

About a third of students enrolled in higher education are first-generation students—students whose parents do not have a four-year college degree. While these students have represented a significant proportion of those attending college for many years, it was not until the early 2000s that the label “first generation” was created by schools and applied to such students. Like all identities, the category of first-generation student is socially constructed. It is a label whose meaning is shaped by those who use it and those to whom it is applied.

In this research, Tina Wildhagen shows how one elite school (“Cabot College”) uses the first-generation label to serve the school’s institutional interests rather than the interests of the students. This is an intriguing finding, as membership in the first-generation student category generally brings more support (academic, financial, and social) from schools. She also finds that the first-generation label is used as a proxy for social class, and that the staff at Cabot that work with first-generation students assume that they are academically and socially less prepared than their peers because of presumed lower social class, even though at Cabot first-generation students are very near their peers in terms of financial resources and academic strength. Wildhagen interviewed first-generation students and found that while some embraced the first-generation label, others found Cabot’s programs for the group to be offensive and unrealistic. But her most significant sociological finding is that the ideology that underlies the first-generation label encourages students to focus on their own individual upward mobility and not to think about how colleges like Cabot might reproduce social class inequality. Identifying with others of your social class and realizing that you share similar life chances is what sociologists call class consciousness, and it tends to be one of the prerequisites to social movements, whether at a particular school across a nation, that demand true equality of opportunity.

Excerpt from “‘Not Your Typical Student’: The Social Construction of the ‘First-Generation’ College Student” by Wildhagen, T. *Qualitative Sociology* (2015) 38, pp. 285–303. Reprinted with permission.



As you read, think about the other ways that schools categorize students, and how those categories benefit the institutional interests of the schools.

Sociologists have long argued that classifying people into groups lies at the heart of inequality (e.g., Massey 2007; Tilly 1999). As Massey (2007, 5–6) writes, “All stratification processes boil down to a combination of two simple but powerful mechanisms: the allocation of people to social categories, and the institutionalization of practices that allocate resources across these categories.” To the extent that cultural communities and social identities cohere around these social categories, categorization also matters for inequality because it can shape peoples’ behaviors and social identities. Moreover, the categorization of people by institutions often serves institutional interests by increasing institutional capacities to monitor and control the behavior and subjectivities of individuals (Scott 1998; Weber 1978).

In this study, I analyze the social construction of one such social category—first-generation college students—at a selective college. I examine how the institutional discourse about first-generation students benefits the school in ways that are at odds with the interests of the students themselves. First-generation college students are typically defined as students without a parent who has graduated from a 4-year college. Although there have always been college students without college-going parents, it was not until the early 2000s that colleges and universities began to socially construct this category—that is, create a decision rule for membership in this category, classify students according to the rule, construct a discourse that defines what it means to belong to this category, and assume that individuals who are assigned to this category find that assignation to be meaningful in some way. In so doing, the category moves from being defined solely in terms of its decision rule (i.e., whether one has a parent who has obtained a college degree) to being defined in terms of the particular social meanings that colleges attach to it.¹ As Armstrong and Massé (2014, 807) write in a review of sociological scholarship on higher education, “Schools not only produce classification systems but also play a salient role in the instantiation of them—that is in the production of persons to fill categories.”

While abundant research on first-generation college students exists, many researchers and higher education professionals tend to take the category for granted, assuming that it is a sensible way of grouping students, and that students themselves see the category as meaningful. Taking a different approach, this study positions the first-generation category itself as the object of analysis. The questions raised by this study revolve around the tension between the external classification of individuals using a nascent social category—the category of first-generation college student—and the reactions of the classified to that assignation. First, I seek to understand the

particular discursive meanings that a selective college (“Cabot College”)² has attached to this category, paying close attention to the ways in which these meanings benefit the college’s interests.

The Power of Classification

Sociologists view classification as an essential element of how power operates in the social world. Bourdieu (1984) focuses on the power to classify certain cultural practices and world views as legitimate as key to understanding how social class inequality works. For example, schools are primary arbiters of class inequality because they evaluate students according to purportedly neutral standards that are actually reflective of middle-class cultural practices and world views. Not only is power exercised by classifying cultural practices, expectations, and narratives as legitimate, but also through the classification of *people* (Bourdieu 1987). Writing about the consequences of being classified, Jenkins (2000, 21–22) notes that “The effective categorization of a group of people by a more powerful Other is thus never just a matter of classification. . . . As an intervention in that group’s social world it will . . . change that world and the experience of living in it; in other words, it has consequences.” That is, classification matters for the people being classified.

From this perspective, classifying students as first generation is not a power-neutral process that follows from an inevitable and logical classification of students, but rather an attempt to group students in a way that benefits institutional interests. Moreover, some of the institutional interests served by classifying students as first generation may conflict with students’ own interests.

Data and Methods

Drawing on data from a larger study of the construction of the first-generation college student category and first-generation identity at multiple colleges, the current study focuses on these processes at one selective liberal arts college (“Cabot College”).³ I collected data at Cabot over a 2-year period, between 2012 and 2014, attending events and conducting interviews with students and staff.

Selective colleges serve as instructive sites for research on the construction of the first-generation category because they sit near the top of the hierarchy of higher education institutions in terms of resources, prestige, and student outcomes. As such, they offer students without a familial heritage of college-going the possibility of more dramatic upward social

mobility compared to less selective and open-access schools.⁴ This possibility of steep upward ascent means that first-generation students at selective colleges may encounter cultural environments that differ more markedly from their home environments compared to the differences that may be experienced at less selective institutions (Davis 2010).

The first part of the analysis focuses on the discourse about first-generation college students at Cabot and the ways in which this discourse serves institutional interests. I trace the contours of this discourse through in-depth interviews with professional staff working in admissions and student affairs and attendance at events and programs aimed at first-generation students. I conducted interviews with ten staff members (six in admissions and four in student affairs), each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. All interviews were semi-structured, beginning with a common schedule of questions and topics but open to pursuing additional topics that were relevant to each participant. Interviews with staff members covered the following topics: staff members' work with first-generation students (both direct and indirect), their perceptions of first-generation students compared to their peers, and their opinions on the usefulness of categorizing students as first generation at Cabot. I also attended four official college events held specifically for first-generation students over the course of two years, including two programs for entering students and two formal dinners.

The second part of the analysis focuses on how students who are categorized as first generation make sense of this categorization. I draw on semi-structured interviews with 30 first-generation students to investigate how students react to being categorized as such by Cabot. Each of the interviews lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. The interviews covered the following topics: family background, family's perceptions of the purpose of college, family encouragement for college, high school academic preparation and social experiences, the transition to college, knowledge of the first-generation category, identification with the first-generation category, and connections with other first-generation students. Although all student participants are first generation, the sample suggests the heterogeneity that exists within that group. The sample includes 18 students from minority racial or ethnic groups (10 Latinas, six African Americans, and two Asians) and 12 who identified as white.⁵ While none of the students' parents had direct experience with a selective college or university, about half of them (16) had parents who had either attended a postsecondary institution before dropping out or obtained an Associate's degree during the student's childhood. Most of the students' parents held working class jobs, such as factory worker, clerical worker, and food-service worker. A minority of students (eight) had at least one parent who held a lower middle-class job, such as bank teller and computer repair technician.

Results

Institutional Discourse about First-Generation Students

First-Generation Discourse: Not Your Typical Student

The starting point for the analysis of the institutional discourse about first-generation college students at Cabot is that these students are seen as separate from the typical college student. According to my participants in the admissions office, which is responsible for marking prospective Cabot students as first generation at their point of first formal contact with the school, this categorization is a necessary and legitimate way of grouping students. Admissions staff saw the first-generation category as having inherent meaning, with the possibility that the meaning of the category was constructed at least in part by the institution going largely unacknowledged. All six of the admissions staff members whom I interviewed indicated that they saw first-generation students as different from other students in consequential ways, despite the fact that they have little if any direct contact with students either before or after they arrive on campus. One admissions worker related how those who read admissions files could assume certain things about an applicant from knowing the educational background of the student's parents: "We know that when we see that a student is first generation, that student isn't your typical student. We have to look at that student differently."

All six of the participants working in the admissions office made comments that similarly distinguished first-generation students from other students, with this marker of difference typically focusing on first-generation students' presumed deficiencies relative to their peers. For instance, when I asked another admissions worker how she thought first-generation applicants differed from other students, her response suggested academic deficiency: "They [first-generation students] haven't had the preparation that our other applicants have. They've gone to high schools with limited resources. They often can't write as well." Another admissions worker referenced cultural differences between first-generation and other students, stating that first-generation students are "coming from different worlds" and "aren't familiar with the culture of college." Admissions staff members thus transform students whose parents have limited direct experience with higher education into an abstraction that focuses on their assumed disadvantages and deficits.

However, according to survey data from a pooled sample of first-year students at Cabot between 2010 and 2014, first-generation Cabot students as a group may not differ as widely from their continuing-generation peers

as admissions staff believe they do.⁶ On average, first-generation students at Cabot reported strong GPAs (3.31, the equivalent of a B-plus average), only slightly lower than the GPA (3.46) reported by their continuing-generation peers. Additionally, 20% of first-generation students reported a GPA of 3.7 (an A-minus average) or higher (compared to about 30% for continuing-generation students). While first-generation Cabot students do report lower average family incomes than their continuing-generation peers, the average reported family income of first-generation respondents (\$100,000) exceeds the national median income for married couples in 2013: \$76,500 (DeNavas-Walt and Proctor 2014). Twenty percent of first-generation students also reported family incomes that exceeded the sample mean (58% for continuing-generation students).

These data show that there are a non-trivial number of students at Cabot who are categorized as first generation, perform quite well academically, and whose families are not economically disadvantaged (at least according to family income), conflicting with the monolithic construction of the group as disadvantaged and underperforming. While first-generation students both at Cabot and nationally (Saenz et al. 2007) do report slightly lower grades than their peers, first-generation Cabot students perform well academically, with many excellent students among them.^{7, 8}

First-Generation Discourse: Becoming Caboters

Once students are admitted, the admissions office provides lists of those students who have been categorized as first generation to various programs administered by student affairs. Among these programs are an orientation and formal dinners held specifically for first-generation students. I conducted interviews with four student affairs workers and attended four of these events.

My interviews with student affairs staff and observations of events for first-generation students indicated that once these students are marked as atypical during the admissions process, they are discursively constructed as conditionally worthy of the institutional resources that are bestowed upon them. This worthiness hinges on students' amenability to socioeconomic and cultural transformation. Earning Cabot's continued support requires recognizing one's family as presenting barriers to success. Students also must be willing to learn about middle-class culture and appreciate its values and aesthetics.

The analysis revealed two ways in which encouraging first-generation students to distance themselves from their families and acculturate to the middle class benefit the institution. First, encouraging separation from families provides Cabot with the space it needs to instill in these students a strong common identity as "Caboters." Cabot staff actively draw upon some of the same qualities that are associated with the discursive construction of

the first-generation category—being intrepid explorers of the world who are dedicated to self-improvement—in order to accomplish this. The very term itself—*first generation*—connotes someone who is on the vanguard, exploring unknown terrain that one’s parents were unable or unwilling to confront. Second, encouraging first-generation students’ movement away from their families and toward middle-class acculturation provides them with a hybrid social class identity that lessens the possibility of recognizing or engaging in class conflict at Cabot.

Each of the four student affairs workers whom I interviewed characterized first-generation students’ parents as unfamiliar with life at a selective college and, therefore, unable to assist them with making informed decisions about any aspect of college life. For example, when asked how first-generation parents’ involvement figures into their adjustment to Cabot, one staff member described these parents as unhelpful at best:

Staff Member: These students can’t call their parents and ask them which classes to take, which clubs to join. Their parents just have no idea about how a school like this works. That’s one of the main difficulties for these students in adjusting to life here. They watch their peers call their parents to consult with them about various things, and they just can’t do it. I knew a [first-generation] student who was talking to her mom about taking an art history course, and her mom just blew up at her. She didn’t understand why a student would want to take a course like that. This particular student decided that it was time to stop talking with her mom about her courses.

Interviewer: What about the art history course upset the student’s mother?

Staff Member: I guess she thought that art history was useless in terms of securing a job after college. She just didn’t seem to get what we’re trying to do here, to broaden students’ horizons, to make them see things in a new way.

In this case, the parent of the first-generation college student is characterized not only as unhelpful, but also as contesting Cabot’s efforts to educate students in the liberal arts tradition. The staff member sees this student’s mother as obstructing Cabot’s attempt to “make [students] see things in a new way,” which the school sees as an important component of what it means to be a Caboter.

Students are warned that their families may act as barriers to their progress, and, as such, they are cautioned that they should be wary of familial interference. They must “blaze their own trails,” as one staff member put it.

Another staff member indicates potential for Cabot to use the first-generation identity to instill a strong Caboter identity in first-generation students:

Staff member: We want all students to feel a sense of belonging to this place. We want them all to wear that Cabot badge loud and proud, to be a Caboter—and hopefully to return year after year, long after they’ve graduated. In order for them to do that, they need to be a part of things here on campus. They can’t be stuck in the world they knew back home. They have to be present here.

Interviewer: Does that mean that first-generation students have trouble also identifying as authentic Cabot students, as Caboters?

Staff member: No, I don’t think it *has* to mean that. Cabot students are strong and driven, they want to explore themselves and what the world has to offer, and first-generation students have that, too. So that’s a good fit, but we want [first-generation] students to have the opportunity to embrace all that it means to be a Caboter.

From this perspective, encouragement to break from one’s family and focus on one’s life at Cabot creates space for the school to instill a strong sense of institutional identity among first-generation students. This staff member alludes to alumni allegiance, with students “return[ing] year after year,” as one reason why fostering an institutional identity is in the interest of the college. Scott (1998, 346) notes that states tend to plan interventions not for individuals with specific tastes and needs, but instead for “generic subjects,” “standardized citizens [who] were uniform in their needs and even interchangeable.” In the same way, transforming all students into Caboters simplifies the school’s work of planning for students’ needs and designing ways to produce loyal graduates.

First-Generation Discourse: Embracing the Middle Class

In order to achieve the upward mobility that a selective college offers them, first-generation students also receive the message from Cabot that they must learn to appreciate and affect middle-class cultural values and norms. The invitation to a dinner held for first-generation students, for example, advised students to wear “business casual” attire, explicitly stating that this excludes pajamas and hats. Many of my student participants

referred to this dinner during our interviews, describing the “strange atmosphere” of the event. One student described her reaction to the dinner:

Yeah, I walked in, and there were like all of these musicians just playing there. I was like what am I supposed to do? Stand right here and listen to it? Or am I supposed to try to talk to people while I'm there. It just seemed really artificial, like, here, listen to this fancy music, first-generation college students. It was really awkward.

This student's comment points to the part of the discourse about first-generation students that focuses on the need to acculturate to the middle class. Many scholars have shown how middle-class cultural capital is valued by gateway institutions like schools and workplaces (Lareau 2003; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). As such, one could make the argument that it is useful for students to become familiar with middle-class cultural norms and tastes. However, given that this emphasis on middle-class socialization is embedded within a discourse that frames first-generation students' families and communities as liabilities, and their own academic preparation as lacking, middle-class socialization becomes framed in terms of learning the *proper* way of behaving and thinking, rather than as a classed set of behaviors that may be valued arbitrarily.

As Armstrong and Massé (2014, 808) note, a “central task” of colleges and universities is “the production of individuals identified with the professional and managerial classes.” The first-generation category may help schools, particularly selective schools, to accomplish that task by providing students with a hybrid social class identity defined by upward mobility and individuality. This hybrid identity potentially diverts students' attention away from antagonistic class relations both on and off campus. The first-generation identity may serve to discipline students to think about social class in individualistic and personal terms rather than in collective terms, lessening the possibility of overt class conflict on campus and paving the way for Cabot, as a selective college, to fulfill expectations of producing upper middle-class managers and professionals. As Russell writes, “Today's vocabulary of class defines the landscape of social relations in terms of politically, socially and historically unencumbered individuals whose liberties are given free expression in the market place” (1995, 36). First-generation students become “unencumbered individuals” who can compete in the free market only once they break from their families of origin. Here, first-generation students are encouraged to adopt a “neoliberal subjectivity,” a view of actively constructing oneself and one's future, which Weis et al. (2014, 202) also found among students at elite secondary schools. One student described this as Cabot's attempt to turn first-generation students into “good little Caboters.”

Students' Responses to the First-Generation Category

In this second half of the analysis, I present students' reactions to being categorized as first generation and to the specific discursive construction of first-generation students at Cabot. While the first-generation category benefits the institution in a number of ways, not all students readily accepted this categorization, with some even pushing back against the first-generation discourse.

Students on Being Categorized as First Generation

Student participants varied by their familiarity with the term “first generation” before they arrived at Cabot. While 40% of my student participants reported having never heard the term before becoming a Cabot student, the other 60% had already heard this term applied to themselves during their participation as high school students in various programs designed to prepare disadvantaged students for college. Students who had not been identified previously as first generation tended to express discomfort with this categorization, while those who had already been classified as such tended to accept the categorization.

A number (seven) of students explained how their pre-college programs had taught them to embrace their first-generation status as a strategic advantage in college admissions. For instance, after noting that she had first learned the term “first generation” in a college preparation program called Reaching High, one student went on to explain how the program had taught students that colleges valued first-generation applicants:

[Reaching High] used it when it regarded [college] applications. So when I first applied [to college], [Reaching High] told me to say I was first generation. You know, they said colleges like to see that, that it could help your application.

Whereas first-generation students who had been categorized as such before arriving at Cabot expressed familiarity with the first-generation category, with many viewing it as a strategic advantage in college admissions, the students who had not participated in pre-college programming aimed at first-generation students were unfamiliar with the term before entering Cabot. While these students were aware that their parents had either not attended or not completed college, none had ever been explicitly categorized according to that fact, nor had many of them given much thought to the implications for them of their parents' educational attainment.

When asked whether she had thought of herself as first generation prior to arriving at Cabot, one such student said that while she knew that

her parents had not gone to college, she “didn’t really identify like that.” She went on, “Most of my friends at home were that [first generation] too, so it was nothing special.” Another student described herself as “still figuring out the first-generation thing” because it had been new to her when she arrived at Cabot. Yet another said that she had not known that first generation “existed as an identity” before coming to Cabot. Nine of these students expressed apprehension at being newly categorized as first generation. As one student told me:

Student: Yeah, so I hadn’t even encountered that term until I came to Cabot. The first encounter that I had [with the term] is that Cabot has this great peer mentoring program for students in the sciences and so they pick up students who are first generation.

Interviewer: So how did it feel to learn that Cabot was now defining you as a member of this group that you’d never heard of?

Student: I like the mentoring program that I’m a part of. I think that’s really cool. But I do feel a little uncomfortable about being put into this first-generation box when I’m not necessarily sure what that’s supposed to mean. It’s not necessarily negative, but it does make me feel uncomfortable sometimes.

The extent to which Cabot students accepted their classification as first generation varied by students’ previous experiences with this classification. On the one hand, first-generation students who had been classified as such prior to attending Cabot tended to view this classification as legitimate and meaningful. Students who had not previously encountered this category, on the other hand, were more likely to question the legitimacy of their personal categorization as first generation.

Students on Becoming Caboters

Although the institutional discourse about the need for first-generation students to break from their families of origin was presented as a universal truth for all first-generation students at Cabot, there was a disparate impact of that piece of the discourse on the students. Some students expressed and displayed a great deal of emotional turmoil about disconnecting from their parents, often crying when describing the changing nature of their relationships with their parents since arriving at Cabot. This separation from one’s parents, held up by Cabot as a necessary condition of first-generation students’ success, amounted to a rejection of one’s parents for these students. Other students seemed to be less emotionally affected by this process, tending to describe separation from parents as a “normal”

part of growing up. The following two students' responses to a program for entering first-generation students, where students were advised to limit contact with their families back home and focus on the resources available at Cabot, illustrate these disparate responses:

Student 1: There's no way. I can't go that long without talking to my parents. . . . I need to see how they're doing, too. Like my little sister and brother. I need to see how they're doing in school.

Interviewer: How did you feel when they said that you shouldn't talk to your parents that often?

Student 1: (through tears) It was upsetting. I can't just leave my family behind like that. . . . Maybe I don't want to be a good little Caboter. Maybe I want to hold on to who I am. They can't take that from me.

Student 2: Oh, believe me, I don't plan to talk to my parents very often. I mean I love them, don't get me wrong, but I need to focus on me here. That's why I'm here.

Interviewer: Do you think that they will call you very often?

Student 2: Maybe like once a week or something. Not too much. No, I think they understand. I need to have some space to figure out life here.

Here, both students perceive the school's directive to avoid familial intrusions as a way to transform them into Caboters. However, while the first student questions whether she "wants to be a good little Caboter," viewing the adoption of a Cabot identity as potentially inconsistent with maintaining who she really is, the second student says that she "does need some space to figure out life here," suggesting that becoming a Caboter might be an important part of who she wants to be.

Students on Adopting a New Social Class Identity

While there were differences in students' willingness and ability to limit contact with their families back home during their time at Cabot, all first-generation students reported feeling culturally out of place at Cabot. Some of the students linked their discomfort with what they perceived as Cabot's efforts to encourage first-generation students to adopt a new social class identity.

As described earlier, a number of my participants (eight) had attended dinners for first-generation college students at Cabot, two of which I also attended. The dinners were formal, with servers bustling around the room

and a string quartet playing in the corner. According to my field notes, during the period before the actual dinner when guests were expected to socialize, many of the students stood along the walls clustered into groups of two or three, glancing from the floor to the string quartet, unsure of what to do. One student described receiving the invitation to this event:

I didn't know what to say [when I received the invitation] because they sent the rudest emails out, like you need to wear formal clothes. That means not pajamas, and not this and this. And it had really patronizing pictures, like *really* patronizing pictures of a suit, or a dress.

Offended by the implication that first-generation students would wear pajamas to a formal event, this student perceived this push to adopt middle-class cultural styles of professional dress as patronizing.

Another student recognized the potential for the first-generation category to dampen the social class awareness of those who are categorized as such by seeing events such as the dinner for first-generation students as lacking solidarity:

Student: In our discussions on campus most of the time, things like class get lost. I mean, I guess when you finally realize you're a minority of some group, you really understand that there's [class] oppression going on. But I feel like the [class] minority here is so low, and there's not a lot of resistance going on here. I'm just looking for more people I can relate to based on class.

Interviewer: Have you attended any of the campus events or programs for first-generation students?

Student: I mean, yeah, like I went to the first-generation dinner, but there was *no solidarity* there. I hated it.

In her negative reaction to the dinner for first-generation students, this student displays a nascent criticism of Cabot's use of the first-generation category to portray social class as an individual achievement rather than relational groups engaged in conflict.

There were, however, a small number of students (three) who had come to embrace the first-generation category for its provision of a classed identity that allowed them to avoid discussing their social class backgrounds in more overt terms. One student's comments typify these sentiments:

Interviewer: Has it been meaningful for you to be a first-generation student at Cabot?

Student: I would say it's probably one of the most meaningful things I've gotten out of Cabot thus far. Part of my culture shock coming in was I didn't know it was common to have parents with Ph.D.'s or with Master's Degrees. I just thought everyone sort of worked blue collar. That's what I was used to. But being first generation, that's a very positive thing. I'm doing something that my parents haven't done. And I can talk about my background in a positive way that people respect.

Interviewer: So do you talk about being first generation more than other aspects of your background?

Student: It's pretty much all I say about myself if I'm talking about my background. I don't want to get into all of that social class stuff, because it can put people off. I don't want to talk about money or anything. But first generation, that's cool. It's like I've achieved something to be here, not like I have this thing going against me.

This student saw the first-generation identity as offering her an opportunity to frame herself as an individual who had earned her place at Cabot, as opposed to someone from a disadvantaged class background whom Cabot had helped. Her comments illustrate how the discourse about first-generation students at Cabot can lead students away from developing a critical class consciousness, which I have argued is in the interest of the institution. Thus, some students avoided claiming an associational class identity by adopting the first-generation identity, which focuses on their accomplishments as individuals rather than their membership in a particular social class.

Discussion and Conclusions

Selective colleges and universities increasingly tout the size of their first-generation populations as markers of social class diversity. Some research even focuses on the benefits of being labeled “first generation” for students. For example, Stephens et al. (2014) found that acknowledging the implications of social class differences for students' college experiences eliminated the GPA gap between first- and continuing-generation students at a private university at the end of their first year of college. However, this study demonstrated how the discursive construction of first-generation students at a selective college can have negative consequences for students who are categorized as such, pushing them to reject their social origins in the quest for upward mobility and obfuscating antagonistic class relations. At the same time, the school benefits from the way in which the first-generation category is constructed, with the category creating space for Cabot to instill

a strong institutional identity in first-generation students and minimizing potential class conflict by diverting students' attention away from developing a critical awareness of social class.

Although I found that some students resented the way in which Cabot discursively constructed first-generation students, there was little evidence that students had attempted to collectively challenge this discourse. Four of the student participants were engaged in an effort to start a student organization for first-generation students, but their plans for the group revolved around providing information to other first-generation students about how to apply for financial aid and access other institutional resources. While they were organizing around the first-generation identity in some sense, these students' efforts were not aimed at disputing the discursive construction of the first-generation category as analyzed in this study.

In fact, the discursive construction of the first-generation category at Cabot probably lessens the likelihood that students would be able to mount any organized resistance using the first-generation category as constructed at Cabot. Some students embraced the first-generation identity as a way to define themselves in terms of individual achievement over associational memberships, a stance that may prove antithetical to engaging in collective action that would challenge the institution. For these students, celebrating their first-generation status discouraged them from developing a critical class consciousness, instead pushing them along an individualist pathway embedded in the meritocratic ideal of individual achievement and neoliberal discouragement of collective action.

Thus, one of the contributions of the present study is that it identifies the following two unrecognized functions of the first-generation category: quelling class conflict on campus and mitigating the internal struggles caused by upward social mobility for many students. The first-generation category provides students with a prefabricated identity that eases the sting of assimilation—and even encourages it—by constructing them as people who possess a high degree of individual merit that differentiates them from their families and communities. The common strategy of conflating first-generation status with social class obscures the fact that the first-generation category as constructed at Cabot has the potential to dampen students' awareness of social classes as relational groups with antagonistic interests.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How different are the first-generation students from the continuing-education students at Cabot College? Do the differences merit the assumptions about deficiency that the staff at Cabot assume exists among first-generation students?

2. How are first-generation students encouraged to “become Caboters”? How do the students feel about this message from the school?
3. Why does the process of classification matter in general? How come categories are something that sociologists are interested in studying?
4. What are the upsides and downsides to the first-generation label?
5. At nonelite colleges and universities, the gap in academic achievement and financial resources between first-generation and continuing-education students is much wider than at Cabot, and they often have more first-generation students. Do you think the label is likely to be problematic in the same ways at less prestigious schools? What research design would you use if you wanted to investigate this question?
6. Look at the study by Pew Research, “A majority of U.S. colleges admit most students who apply,” available at <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/09/a-majority-of-u-s-colleges-admit-most-students-who-apply/>, about how selective American colleges and universities are. What is likely different at less prestigious schools than at places like Cabot? Do you think the findings of the Pew study are good news or bad news for first-generation students?

NOTES

1. It is important to note that the discursive meanings applied to this category by colleges are not invented from whole cloth. For example, research indicates that first-generation students have lower graduation rates (Chen 2005; Engle and Tinto 2008; Lohfink and Paulsen 2005), lower college grades (Aspelmeier et al. 2012; Billson and Terry 1982), and weaker integration with campus life (Pascarella et al. 2004) than do their continuing-generation peers. However, discursive constructions of the first-generation category shape students’ perceptions about the sources and magnitudes of these differences, the meanings of these differences, and how to respond to these differences.
2. The name of the college has been changed.
3. I omit identifying information about all interview participants. In some cases, details have been changed to protect confidentiality.
4. In fact, research suggests that for students whose parents have less education, attending a selective college may yield greater returns than for those whose parents have more education (Hout 2012).
5. I interviewed three international students but omit them from this analysis because their experiences and perceptions as first-generation students were heavily informed by the cultural, economic, and political contexts of their countries of origin.

6. These data were culled from a survey administered annually to the entire first-year class at Cabot between 2010 and 2014. Response rates averaged 33% over the five years of data collection. Each year's sample closely resembled the population of the first-year class for that year in terms of racial/ethnic and first-generation composition.
7. For other outcomes and experiences, however, there appear to be wider discrepancies between first- and continuing-generation students. For example, research suggests that graduation rates for first-generation college students are roughly half those for continuing-generation students (Chen 2005; Nuñez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998). Some research using national samples of students also finds that first-generation students are less engaged socially and academically at college than are continuing-generation students (e.g., Pike and Kuh 2005; Strayhorn 2006).
8. As a selective college, Cabot likely chooses from a pool of first-generation applicants that is less economically disadvantaged than the pool of first-generation applicants at less selective schools. Thus, at less selective schools, there may be larger gaps in academic achievement between first- and continuing-generation students.

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