

Definitions for First Generation & Low-Income Students Erase Experiences and Hinder
Progress

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Abstract

There is currently no consistent way to identify first generation and low-income students in postsecondary institutions within the United States. Each institution creates their own definition to identify these populations which in some cases differs from the federally recognized definitions. Oftentimes, the student populations are represented as a monolith, where postsecondary experiences are tied to the simplified description of “first generation, low-income.” This joint term falls short of representing the nuance of first generation and low-income student communities. By employing the Critical Race Theory framework of intersectionality, this paper defines first generation and low-income students within higher education, explores what common challenges first generation and low-income students experience in secondary education, highlights the significant gaps within this body of literature, and demonstrates how low-income students of color have a more difficult time navigating postsecondary education.

Table of Contents

Title Page	1
Abstract	2
Table of Contents	3
Introduction	4
Defining First Generation College Students	6
Common Obstacles for First Generation Students	8
Deciphering the Complexity of Defining Low-Income Students	10
Barriers in Practice: Increasing Transparency Serves All Low-Income Students	13
First Generation, Low-Income Students: An Intersectional Lens	16
Exploration of Racialized First Generation, Low-Income Identity	18
Low-Income Students of Color Experience Additional Hurdles to Academic Success	23
Citations.....	28
Appendix.....	31

Definitions for First Generation & Low-Income Students Erase Experiences and Hinder Progress

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Introduction

Over the course of the last ten years the term “first generation student” has become the all-encompassing signal within higher education institutions to describe their most “at risk” students, who are often a focus in recruitment and retention efforts (Jean, 2017). While each institution determines its own definition to identify first generation students, there are commonly used definitions like “undergraduate students whose parents had not participated in postsecondary education” (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018, p.2) or the federal definition; “An individual both of whose parents did not complete a baccalaureate degree” (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). First generation status is often a euphemism for students of color (Taylor and Turk, 2019), and in some cases is conflated with low-income status. This often leads to many institutional supports (offices, identity-based centers, initiatives, or identifiable staff members) for both student populations being organizationally structured together. Combining the terms first generation and low-income allows for postsecondary institutions to categorize a subset of their student population that may need the most substantial forms of institutional support, but this conflation does not account for either population’s distinct experiences.

The experience that students have when navigating college and university campuses changes significantly depending on whether they are first generation, low-income, or both. Because of these varied experiences, it is often hard to identify which interventions lead to a successful¹ college experience with no national consistency to track these students. Many of the

¹ Success Defined as: Earning postsecondary credential at postsecondary institution.

4.5 million students who are both first generation and low-income begin their journey to higher education by connecting to college access programs (e.g., Breakthrough Collaborative, Gear Up, Upward Bound, Schuler Scholar Program, Project GRAD, Federal TRiO Programs etc.) in middle and high school, which aim to increase college awareness and postsecondary persistence for these populations (Engle and Tinto, 2008). College access programs such as TRiO's Talent Search Program, Breakthrough Collaborative, and SEO Scholars apply different approaches to solving the achievement gap² issue, typically focusing on increasing cultural capital for their students to successfully navigate university spaces through mentorship, financial literacy, academic preparation, and empowerment. Once admitted into universities, and sometimes before in the case of programs like Posse or Questbridge, many of these students are connected to additional transition support within the institution such as bridge programs, targeted identity-based pre-orientation programs, and first year advising seminars. There is no standard approach to creating these on-campus support systems; however, they all share a goal of offering students' opportunities to connect with essential campus support at their institution.

Studies show that first generation and low-income students are more likely to be students of color (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Taylor and Turk, 2018). Data also shows that many institutions conflate the identities of first generation and low-income students, and routinely ignore the systemic barriers (i.e. race, gender, and disability status) that amplify the forces of oppression for many of the students this body of research serves to acknowledge. Specifically, the inclusion of race within this scholarship is consistently missing, which effectively erases the experience of countless students as they navigate postsecondary education. Defining the impact of structural

² Definition of achievement gap is the disparity in academic performance among students.

forms of oppression, including racism and sexism, on first generation and low-income students' experiences is critical to fully account for the intersectional challenges these students face.

As the Director of a center designed to support first generation and low-income students, and as someone who participated in many programs like the ones I now run, I find myself reflecting on the true barriers the students I support and students like me face as they navigate college. During this review, I will define first generation and low-income, explore how race intersects with first generation and low-income identities, and identify which identity (first generation, low-income, or both) presents more significant barriers to a student's academic success at four-year institutions of higher education. Throughout the process of this review, I demonstrate that it is important to consider these terms as lacking the nuance to describe the experience of low-income and first generation students. Additionally, I also demonstrate that students of color have an even more difficult time navigating postsecondary education and the research does little to incorporate this reality. Race is inextricably intertwined with income and access to educational opportunities for first generation students in many, but not all, cases. Removing these factors from the body of research on postsecondary education erases entire lived experiences which impact metrics like persistence and graduation rates.

Defining First Generation College Students

For the purposes of this literature review, first generation students are defined as the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree which is pared down from definitions similar to Engle and Tinto's. Definitions of first generation are complicated and the selection criteria changes depending on context or service organization. The authors of *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, first generation Students*, Engle and Tinto, have defined first

generation status as “students whose parents may have some college, postsecondary certificate, or associate degrees, but no bachelor’s degrees,” or “first generation students as those whose parents have no education beyond high school” (Engle and Tinto, 2008).

The term first generation was first defined by Fuji Adachi in 1979, “[referring] to students who do not have at least one parent with a bachelor’s degree” (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2018). This definition has since been adapted to support different research criteria over the past few decades. Adachi’s definition is the foundation of the scholarship for defining this student population but is limited in its application. I opted to use the definition, “a student who is first in their family to earn a bachelor’s degree” because it is most adaptable to the changing student experience and is the definition used by the Federal TRIO Programs.

Some scholars may argue that having a family member who has completed their associate degree excludes students from first generation status. Peralta and Klonowski conducted a review of 24 articles to “shed light on the extent of inconsistency between definitions of the concept first generation college student in studies that are published in high-impact higher education journals” (2017, p. 630). In many cases the term first generation was not clearly defined, and in many cases non-inclusive definitions were used. Some of these definitions include, “no member of immediate family had earned at least an associate’s or baccalaureate degree,” “parents do not have a postsecondary education,” and “first generation in family to go to college” (Peralta and Klonowski, 2017, p. 632). I chose the definition which states that a student would need to be the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree to be considered first generation because there are distinct differences between two- and four-year institutions. Family members who have earned an associate degree or completed some form of vocational training after high school may be able to support a student with navigating many of the administrative hurdles of attending a four year

institution, but the structure of the university and experiential differences can prove to be difficult to navigate without prior knowledge.

Some could argue that even the definition I selected for this review is too narrow in scope as it does not account for students whose families were educated outside the United States or students whose family member pursued their bachelor's degree later in life and therefore had an untraditional college experience, among others. Two-year and four-year institutions, which can operate as either private, public or for-profit institutions, are so drastically different that having a family member who has earned an associate degree is useful in understanding some, but not all, of the administrative aspects of navigating college. The environments vary depending on student population (e.g., commuter/non-commuter), administrative supports, and funding opportunities. These stark differences are also evident in the types of funding institutions can devote to student financial aid packages and overall cost of attendance.

Common Obstacles for First Generation Students

NASPA's Center for First Generation Student Success published a fact sheet titled *First-generation College Students: Demographic Characteristics and Postsecondary Enrollment* (2019), which details postsecondary enrollment and demographic characteristics. This survey found that first generation students are more often to be a student of color, female, a military veteran, and have dependents while enrolling in postsecondary education. Of the 89,000 study participants surveyed, first generation students were also more likely to enroll part-time, as 40% were listed as attending full-time versus 48% of their continuing non-first generation peers (p. 1). First generation students often struggle because they are unable to take advantage of the cultural capital their parents possess to navigate college (e.g., understanding the significance of the

syllabus, what “office hours” means, or how to cite sources in written assignments) (Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018, p. 2). This lack of cultural capital can negatively impact first generation students navigating, despite being academically prepared for entering their institution. Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen go on to highlight that first generation students enroll in postsecondary education at lower rates than their continuing non-first generation peers and demonstrate different patterns of persistence and degree attainment (2018). During their study they compared three types of students, those who had parents that did not participate in post-secondary education, students who had parents with some experience, and those whose parents had a bachelor’s degree. All students represented by these figures graduated from the same high school in 2002 and were tracked until 2012. “26 percent [of students whose parents did not participate in postsecondary education] began at public 4-year institutions compared with 33 percent of those whose parents attended some college and 45 percent of those whose parents had earned a bachelor’s degree, while 7 percent began at private nonprofit 4-year institutions compared with 12 and 23 percent, respectively” (2018, pp. 6 - 7). This data highlights that when students have the same pre-college preparation there are still significant disadvantages to postsecondary completion that may not be represented completely by the quantitative data alone.

For instance, cost may be a significant factor for the first generation students. In Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen’s review of the data there was a clear difference in when a first generation student enrolled in postsecondary education. Of the students whose parents did not participate in any postsecondary secondary education, 46 percent of students enrolled first in a public 2-year institution, compared with 42 percent of those whose parents had some college education and 26 percent of students whose parents had earned a bachelor’s degree (2018). It is important to highlight that there are other variables not represented in this study that may further complicate

this research but would add a more nuanced understanding of the students being represented. For instance, how does the student's income level intersect with the varying forms of cultural capital they possess before enrolling in postsecondary education? Did the outcomes depend on their understanding of how students might afford attending a university? Would this new information change how persistence track data is understood? Most often, first generation students were more likely to leave their persistence track³ and not receive a post-secondary credential of any kind. It must be stated that this data is useful in identifying potential barriers to first generation success rates but is not all-encompassing due to the small sample size and constraints of the definition employed to conduct the study.

Deciphering the Complexity of Defining Low-Income Students

For the purposes of this review, I will utilize a definition that considers the commonly used criteria at most postsecondary institutions in the United States, estimated family contribution. The definition I employ to define low-income students hails from Tufts University, where low-income students are considered to have an estimated family contribution of \$10,000 or less. There is no perfect way to define this population, and through conducting this literature review I noticed that the commonly used definition was not expansive enough to serve the greatest student needs. The definition I chose includes a multi-step process that begins with each student's submission of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which considers

³ "Students who stayed on the persistence track attained a credential from the original institution or one of the same level, or were still enrolled at the original institution or one of the same level without a stop out (an enrollment break of more than 4 months) by 2006. Those who left the persistence track had transferred to a lower level institution or stopped out but were still enrolled in 2006, while students who left without return had not attained a credential and were no longer enrolled in 2006." (2018, p.8)

numerous income factors such as taxed and untaxed income, assets, benefits, and family size. Upon completing a FAFSA, each institution then creates a formula which uses a student's estimated family contribution (EFC) - which is calculated via the FAFSA application - and the individual institution's cost of attendance (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The FAFSA also determines a student's eligibility for a Pell Grant which is used by most institutions as the determinant for low-income status. Pell Grant eligibility is considered differently from the likelihood a student will receive a Pell Grant as all eligible students may not be able to receive an award due to funding constraints in a given year (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Typically, low-income students are considered Pell eligible and come from minoritized families who earn within a range of \$25,000 - \$30,000 per year (Engle and Tinto, 2008; Taylor and Turk, 2019). Typically, these income ranges are chosen because students lose eligibility for Pell grants and TRIO programs when earning above this amount. There was no consistent metric to identify the common income threshold for independent students, those whose parents do not financially contribute to their education. Taylor and Turk go on to describe the demographic trends they found for low-income students, "More than half of all Black (59.8 percent), American Indian or Alaska Native (54.0 percent), and Hispanic (52.9) [are low-income] and White students were the least likely of all racial and ethnic groups to be low income (33.6 percent)" (Taylor and Turk, 2019, p. 3). This demographic information helps to illustrate how there is no one factor that should be considered in a vacuum; class and race should be considered as an interconnected experience within the United States, as these income level statistics reflect a country founded on white supremacy. The populations hit hardest by wealth inequality have been systematically prevented from opportunities that support upward mobility in this country's history, including the right to own land or to pursue postsecondary education.

A family's EFC does not include enough information to fully represent low-income status or poverty levels. Poverty levels are determined by The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) and are used by the U.S. Department of Education to determine eligibility for federal programs like TRIO (Office for Postsecondary Education, 2021) throughout a student's lifetime. Poverty levels are in some ways useful because low-income students are oftentimes impacted by poverty throughout their lives. The guidelines are updated each year and government institutions are able to use them to consider poverty level with some variance. Families are considered low-income if they are within 150 percent of the poverty guidelines and rarely "exceed 150 percent of the poverty level amount," which is used by the Federal Trio Programs. The unfortunate reality is that the cost of attendance has continued to increase exponentially over the last forty years, but the designation of low-income status and national wages have not increased at the same rate. As described by Maldonado, "The average for all four-year institutions comes out to \$26,120 per year. This brings the total cost of attendance to an astronomical total of \$104,480 over four years. The comparable cost for the same four-year degree in 1989 was \$26,902 (\$52,892 adjusted for inflation). This means that between the academic years ending in 1989 and 2016, the cost for a four-year degree doubled, even after inflation" (2018). This disparity widens the gap for low-income students pursuing higher education as there is no increase to financial aid.

These common barriers to college affordability for low-income students can be summarized in two key issues: 1) lack of transparency prevents students and their families from understanding how much they are committing for their students' education. A common practice is to reveal the amount a student should pay after they have enrolled in their university of choice, which includes their Pell award amount, cost of attendance, grants, loans and estimated family

contribution. And 2) non-equitable policies to identify and award support for low-income families within the United States.

Barriers in Practice: Increasing Transparency Serves All Low-Income Students

There have been some alternative suggestions for more equitable ways to identify low-income students which could more holistically define their lived experiences. As stated above, most low-income college students experience poverty throughout their lifetime and the barriers that postsecondary funding via grants, scholarships, and loans aim to remove exist before students prepare to apply. In place of FAFSA applications and estimated family contributions as determinants of support, Choy advocates for the use of the federal poverty guidelines instead. Choy conducted a study of low-income students in 2000, which used Poverty Guidelines from 1994 to define this population. In the study, Choy raised useful framing for the poverty guidelines' usage over other systems to define low-income status.

First, it is independent of who goes to college, meaning that students meeting this criterion are poor relative to the general population, not just relative to other college students. Second, because the poverty levels are stated in terms of both income and family size (as shown in table 1B), comparisons among students in different family sizes are appropriate. Finally, the poverty levels are updated annually and adjusted for inflation, allowing meaningful comparisons over time. (2000, p. 3)

This framing is impactful because the federal poverty guidelines are also used by government agencies like Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the National School Lunch Program, certain parts of Medicaid, and the subsidized portion of Medicare – Prescription Drug Coverage, AIDS Drug Assistance Program, Job Opportunities for Low-Income Individuals, and others to provide aid, and is not only limited to college-going populations (ASPE, 2021). The FAFSA incorporates this standard into its calculations of a family's ability to pay for

postsecondary education, and even with Pell Grants and other forms of institutional aid many low-income students still struggle to cover the full costs of attending a university. Instead, students may need to consider working part-time via work study or taking loans to afford to attend many private and public institutions. This is important because research shows that those who work more than 15 to 20 hours per week can experience negative impacts to academic performance and educational aspirations, especially among high school students (Carnevale, Smith, Melton, & Price, 2015).

Rueben, Gault, and Baum (2016) expanded upon this concept of changing the selection criteria for federal aid for low-income students in their brief, *Simplifying Federal Student Aid*. They discussed the most useful way to increase accessibility to federal student aid as creating a formula that is only based on two variables, income, and family size.

This model ties Pell amounts to how family income compares with the federal poverty level (FPL), which varies by family size. Under this formula, families with incomes at or below 150 percent of the FPL would receive maximum Pell awards; award amounts would phase down evenly from maximum Pell to zero for those with incomes between 150 and 250 percent of the FPL. We conclude that splitting out the Pell grant calculation from the rest of the federal aid application process using a formula like the two-factor model, while maintaining a simplified EFC calculation for other types of aid, is optimal. (2016)

For further investigation of the impact of simplifying Pell grant eligibility and increasing transparency for low-income families, I included two sets of family poverty guidelines from the ASPE. Table 1A represents the guidelines published in 2021 and Table 1B represents the guidelines in 1994. Table 1A automatically includes the guideline calculated with an increase of 150 percent which was used by the federal TRIO Programs specifically. For the year 2021, The ASPE lists the Poverty Guideline as \$12,880 for a single person household. Table 1A includes the additional 150% which increases this amount to \$19,320 for the 48 contiguous states, D.C. and outlying jurisdictions listed.

There is no perfect definition to describe this population, which is further complicated by the institution type because private institutions, based on their funding structure, are more equipped to offer students non-federal financial aid and other financial support. At Tufts University, the low-income designation was raised to \$10,000 EFC in the summer of 2020⁴ to expand beyond the narrow Pell eligibility threshold used by most institutions to support students more holistically from low-income backgrounds. Before this change, a committee was formed to conduct a comprehensive review of student outcomes as it relates to income status. This committee conducted research, held focus groups, and assessed all available information to identify a better solution to mitigate the costs of higher education that were not included in financial aid. The research revealed that many low-income students found it difficult to be successful after enrolling because of costs incurred outside of financial aid awards. The committee decided to increase the low-income EFC threshold by \$5,000 above the Pell Eligibility cut off to help solve for a gap in historical access to resources as well as access to adequate resources on Tufts' Medford campus⁵. Which is why I chose to define low-income students as an EFC of \$10,000 or less. It includes many of the metrics described above as helpful to identify low-income students and is applicable for students who would not otherwise be considered Pell eligible, such as international students and students with undocumented status, as a narrow focus on governmental funding inherently excludes many of the United States' student population.

⁴ This EFC was raised by \$3,000 to account for the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on low-income families.

⁵ The decision to use Tufts as an example is grounded both in my years of experience overseeing these programs and therefore having extensive qualitative and quantitative data on the varying needs of low-income students and my learnings from the many sources I explored for this review. I acknowledge that not all institutions, especially public four year colleges, have access to the financial security to increase their low-income threshold to \$10,000.

As I conducted my review and from my experience supporting low-income students at a private four-year institution, I recognized that there were significant lifelong factors that created immense barriers for low-income students to be successful in postsecondary education that predate their arrival on a college campus. There also seems to be a targeted disregard for the ways race may impact a student's experience, especially if they are also low-income. Taylor and Turk raise that they have found that "by race and ethnicity, students of color were more likely to be low income than white students" (Taylor and Turk, 2019). Choy (2000) also raises a complimentary point by stating, "Certain groups were particularly likely to be in [the low-income] category, including minorities and students whose parents had not gone to college. As parents' education increased, the percentage who were low income decreased (from 55 percent when both parents had less than a high school diploma to 23 percent when at least one parent had finished high school to 12 percent when at least one parent had attended college)." (p. iv.)

First Generation, Low-Income Students: An Intersectional Lens

For this analysis, the definition of students who are both first generation and low-income (FGLI) combines the two definitions described above-- students whose EFC is \$10,000 or less and are the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree. Beyond simplifying this identity to those two definitions, it is important to contextualize that being first generation, low-income means carrying the burden of two distinct unseen marginalized identities. First generation, low-income students are also "disproportionately from ethnic and racial minority backgrounds with lower levels of academic preparation. They also tend to be older, less likely to receive financial support from parents, and more likely to have multiple obligations outside college, like family and work, that limit their full participation in the college experience" (Engle and Tinto, 2008, p.

8). The experiential challenges articulated above exist for all first generation, low-income students, but the burden of increased forms of marginalization can create additional hurdles for minoritized students. I am using Kimberle Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality, defined as the convergences of multiple forms of oppression (Crenshaw, 1991), to explore these two identities.

In Crenshaw's study, she used two forms of intersectionality, structural and political, to define the limitations and apparent blind spots that exist for marginalized communities across various traits like gender, race, and immigration status. Her definition of structural intersectionality is more relevant to the identities I am exploring:

Where systems of race, gender, and class domination converge, as they do in the experiences of battered women of color, intervention strategies based solely on the experiences of women who do not share the same class or race backgrounds will be of limited help to women who because of race and class face different obstacles. (1991, p. 1246 - 1250)

In her study of immigrant women in battered women shelters, she found there was a lack of understanding of the nuances of these women's identities to create appropriate policy to best support them. Because of this lack of understanding and the insistence on creating policy interventions that address universal issues, not the nuances of immigrant women experiencing abuse, many women found themselves choosing between deportation or remaining in an abusive relationship. These blind spots would result in what Crenshaw described as double subordination of the women whose intersecting experiences were not considered in the creation of the policy. I utilize this understanding of intersectionality because it is most similar to what happens when colleges and universities define first generation and low-income students synonymously and ignore the nuance of each identity, as well as the added burdens of holding both.

Exploration of Racialized First Generation, Low-Income Identity

By applying an expanded framing of Crenshaw's lens of intersectionality to the intersecting identities of first generation and low-income students, it becomes more feasible to explore how other forms of marginalization like race/ethnicity and gender intersect with first generation and low-income identities. "The study of intersectionality is not binary nor a study of one identity versus another, but rather the deconstruction of how all these categories work with one another" (Tevis & Griffen, 2014), which is important to raise as Crenshaw's work focuses on the intersection created by the exclusion of two federally protected categories (gender and race). Similarly, the experience related to income status or first generation status are inextricably intertwined with other forms of oppression and privilege. Race and class inform the way that all students understand and navigate the world, and to remove these from the discussion around postsecondary education would erase their entire lived experience. Issues of racism, discrimination, and prejudice have created systems that lead to segregated educational environments along race and class lines. Barriers to social mobility through institutionalized mechanisms of white supremacy since this country's inception cannot be ignored when defining these student populations, potential barriers they encounter navigating postsecondary education, and degree attainment.

There is limited literature exploring these intersections, especially race, which is surprising considering the prevalence on college campuses of microaggressions that minoritized students of color experience. Some of the data-driven articles I reviewed were written with a colorblind lens (Engle and Tinto, 2008; Cataldi, Bennett, & Chen, 2018), or explicitly narrowed the participant criteria to homogenous racial populations (Anthony Jack, 2014; Stuber, 2011; Aries and Seider, 2005) both of which serves to distinctly erase the experiences of all first generation, low-income students. Additionally, many of the databases that created reports that

combined the first generation, low-income populations commonly mentioned that data was not generalizable due to small sample sizes across various demographics. This highlights the significant difficulty one has to make inferences based on data that can be described as variably accurate, and which explicitly removes variables that may lead to drastically different conclusions. In many cases the research treats race/ethnicity and gender as standalone variables that do not significantly contribute to a student's college experience. I identified this strange phenomenon because many of the articles I reviewed for this study made no reference to the other forms of structural barriers to social and academic success in the college setting. For example, Aries and Seider (2005) acknowledge the impact that race, gender, and age have on a student's college experiences but in turn choose to avoid that topic entirely even for their white identifying participants. They highlight that the experiences of "lower income students who are African-American, Hispanic, Asian and White may differ from one another, [but decided to] hold race constant and to restrict [their] sample to students who were white" (p. 422). The insistence on cleanly structured studies devoid of exposing the complex intersections of lived experience for many diverse students which can both hinder, and provide advantage to, students' postsecondary experiences limit the overall progress that this body of research can have. As Crenshaw stated about identity politics, "the problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (1991, p. 1242). The persistent neglect of this intersection is a consistent gap in the literature, and even in studies where race and gender are explicitly mentioned, the data provides only general conclusions that most marginalized students will encounter significant struggles while progressing through their postsecondary degree.

The data helps illuminate the adverse implications of racism and microaggressions for students of color at elite universities, most commonly predominantly white institutions in the United States. First, it is important to name the destructive impact that pre-established biases from faculty, staff, and other students have on students within all three of these populations. The general narrative that is created by the conflation of these two experiences often lead people to mistakenly assume that students of color are members of this community. Challenging the assumptions associated with the term at-risk, which is used to describe students who are at risk to graduate, Daniel Jean raises an important point.

The groups that often receive the “at-risk” categorization include low-income, first generation Black and brown scholars from opportunity programs. Labeling a segment of the student population as “at-risk” because they have experienced historical poverty and vicious discrimination, however, is problematic and should be explored and revisited on college campuses nationwide. (2017, p. 28)

Naturally, there is a unique danger in the all-encompassing term of first generation, low-income especially when our assumption is that these students are mostly black and brown. There are common “hidden curriculum” or cultural barriers that first generation, low-income students commonly experience: understanding the purpose of faculty office hours, seeking out co-curricular resources, building relationships with faculty/staff outside the classroom. All students, regardless of identity, can find themselves struggling to navigate these support structures; however, by including race in the analysis, there are oftentimes different expectational outcomes related to a student’s progress toward their degree. Black and Brown students are considered at-risk while their white peers are assumed to understand how to navigate these systems. Of course, both sides of this argument lend itself to stereotype threat⁶ as white students are not ascribed to the first generation, low-income identity and therefore can be excluded from support, while their

⁶A situational predicament in which people are or feel themselves to be at risk of conforming to stereotypes about their social group.

black and brown peers are assumed to be at-risk regardless of their identities which leads to repeated microaggressions.

Issues of class marginalization have become apparent for low-income students, especially those who are also racially and ethnically marginalized, when transitioning to the college setting; however, adding issues of race and ethnicity are helpful to explore the unseen difficulties that create barriers for students to succeed. Despite the lack of acknowledgement in many research studies, I am confident researchers are aware of the impacts that “family income, race/ethnicity, parent education, geographic location and dependency status” (Indicators, 2020) and other variables that play on degree attainment, but have a hard time quantifying the adverse impacts of race and ethnicity on overall success in the college setting. I found that the comprehensive reviews of the U.S. Department of Education datasets were limited in scope because describing degree attainment, participation rates, and barriers to postsecondary success based on quantitative data is limited. The influences on success and the adverse impacts of these experiences that act as barriers are difficult to quantify without complementary qualitative data.

The experiences for first generation and low-income students in the university setting can be difficult for a variety of reasons. Commonly, scholars argue that these students experience difficulty interacting with the hidden curriculum, which can be defined as unspoken, sometimes unintentional, transference of dominant class norms and values within university settings (Cotton, Winter, & Bailey, 2013). I considered this definition useful and aligned it with Bourdieu's definitions of social and cultural capital. The type of curricular and experiential preparation students has before attending college significantly impacts their experience overall. Additionally, once arriving on a college campus, the level of involvement students has with their campus community can have an impact on their success. Anthony Jack's *Culture Shock Revisited*

(2014) focuses on a small group of Black identifying low-income students while exploring topics related to class marginality and suggests that experiences of feeling like an outsider because of one's class background are not uniform. Rather, class marginality has cultural and social contingencies. It is those lower-income undergraduates whose lives before college are socially and culturally dissimilar to their lives in college who experience the effects of class marginality most acutely, which can impact academic persistence, degree attainment, and overall connectedness to college campuses. Aries and Seider (2005) conducted a similarly compelling study focused on white identifying students, where they explored students' class identities and college experience at private and public institutions. They found the types of support and interventions necessary for college success could vary depending on the impacts of these compounding identities. Racialized experiences for the students Aries and Seider study does not manifest barriers in the same ways as Jack's students. But both student communities experience the strain of being low-income students in postsecondary education. Most low-income students come from poverty-stricken neighborhoods with education systems that lack many essential resources and cultural capital to aid in the preparation for postsecondary success. "Schools that serve low-income populations tend to have fewer instructional resources, less rigorous curriculums, and teachers with fewer formal qualifications" (Owens, Reardon, Sean, & Jenchs, 2016, p. 1162). Supporting students holistically is a complicated process that leads many students to feel unseen because of the common one-size-fits-all approach. The term first generation thus does little to capture the complexity of the college experience that students of color have (Nguyen and Nguyen, 2018).

Low-Income Students of Color Experience Additional Hurdles to Academic Success

Throughout this literature review, I placed several authors directly in conversation with each other to define first generation and low-income student populations. The literature also highlighted consistencies amongst these populations while demonstrating that there are significant challenges to tracking student success trends consistently, especially as it pertains to race/ethnicity. Since definitions depend on the host institution it is often hard to identify consistent national metrics, and Pell Grants have become a stand-in for low-income students because of this problem in particular. While Pell eligibility is not all-encompassing, it does lend itself to identifying a larger set of low-income students nationally. One important theme that became apparent through this review is that there are distinct differences between the experiences of students who are first generation and those who are low-income. This observation excludes students who are both first generation and low-income, because the impact of socioeconomic class are also incorporated into their experiences. Financial barriers were the most consistent barrier to college success for a variety of reasons like lifelong impact via economic segregation, income barriers that may require additional support via federal programs like SNAP, and the added pressures of financially supporting oneself once enrolled in a postsecondary institution. As discussed above, much of the literature leans toward combining the characteristics of both populations to identify barriers to success and generalize postsecondary persistence patterns. But this forced conflation erases the experiences of many unseen students because first generation, low-income individuals are disproportionately students of color, women, military veterans, and of an older age when beginning their postsecondary journey (Engle and Tinto, 2008; Taylor and Turk, 2018). Low-income students typically have additional barriers to postsecondary success that span their lifetime. As the use of the national poverty guidelines demonstrate, if a family is able to qualify for Pell eligibility there is also a stronger

likelihood that their family also qualifies for public support programs like WIC, SNAP, Medicaid, among other federal programs. Most often, high poverty schools are likely to receive federal support like the free and reduced lunch programs to support their students holistically. These differences in capital significantly impact the level of access to opportunities that support postsecondary success. Both in the literature and my experience supporting these populations, low-income status is a lifelong experience that is typically not adequately addressed by the financial support offered by even the most prestigious universities that only directly address tuition and housing costs. Students often arrive at their prospective universities with needs that exist outside of the support systems that colleges and universities offer lack of exposure and access to rigorous college preparatory programs (like AP or IB). This is not always true for students who are first generation and not low-income.

In *Moving Beyond Access: College Success for Low-Income, First generation (2008)*, the authors describe struggles to college success that these students face, such as their disproportionate lack of academic preparation, lack of financial support from parents, and an increased likelihood to have obligations outside of education like family and work (p. 3). The data Engle and Tinto refer to includes students from all university types, with first generation, low-income students equaling roughly 4.5 million students enrolling post-secondary education in 2004 (Engle and Tinto, 2008). Even with such a large subset of students entering some form of higher education, many students still struggle to graduate-- a significant issue which is not thoroughly explored in the research. Engle and Tinto (2008) go on to highlight that this population, “even after taking their demographic backgrounds, enrollment characteristics, and academic preparation into consideration, low-income and first generation students are still at greater risk of failure in postsecondary education. This suggests that the problem is as much the

result of the experiences these students have *during* college as it is attributable to the experiences they have *before* they enroll” (p. 3).

The literature points to a clear expectation that universities expect students to assimilate into the campus culture to be best able to succeed in the college setting. Many students interviewed (Jack, 2014; Stuber, 2011; Aries and Seider, 2005) commented on the varied experiences of students who navigate elite universities. Jack (2014) for instance coined two terms for the low-income students he surveyed, one of which is “doubly disadvantaged” and refers to students who “make the transition from these secondary institutions to elite colleges.... They are so named because in college, they are economically disadvantaged, have lower stocks of dominant cultural capital, and have less exposure to the cultural and social norms of elite colleges to draw upon in their transition and acclimation to college” (p. 455). Additionally, he explores the experiences of another set of low-income students termed “privileged poor” to show how the experiences of students in elite universities who hail from similar upbringings can drastically change by the level of experience one might have with elite college settings. Specifically, the privileged poor are exposed to the dominant forms of cultural and social capital in secondary education. (Jack, 2014) The main differences between these two groups are that “unlike the Doubly Disadvantaged, [the privileged poor] have higher stocks of dominant cultural capital and greater pre college experiences in socially, culturally, and structurally similar educational contexts to draw upon in their transition and acclimation to college life” (Jack, 2014, p. 455). Having experiences in affluent environments before college does create an opportunity to explore many tenets of the hidden curriculum that comes with attending a college or university. For students who are low-income it is possible that the level of cultural capital, existing structures that allocate importance and value to different experiences, and social capital,

people and messages that inform and direct students' decisions and value system (Stuber, 2011), varies greatly depending on the type of access they have had in their lives before attending the university.

Aries and Seider (2005) note the stark differences in experience between first generation and low-income students as they transition to both private and public colleges.

The first generation students who entered the elite college with the least cultural capital evidenced the greatest initial feelings of intimidation, discomfort, inadequacy, and deficiency. As to the issue of exclusion and powerlessness, lower income students at the elite college displayed roughly similar feelings regardless of the educational background of their parents. Our study points to the importance of looking at both economic and cultural capital in an analysis of social class in a college setting. Simply differentiating students by family income or parental "collar" (Lubrano 2004) ignores the attitudes, skills, and levels of confidence that distinguish adolescents within similar income brackets. Upwardly mobile second-generation students may still be subject to the "hidden injuries of class" (Sennett and Cobb 1972), but their added cultural capital helps them to buffer the class issues they face and lessens the conflict within their "straddler" (Lubrano 2004) identities. Perhaps that is why the students at the elite college with a college educated parent showed the greatest gains in self-confidence and Self-respect.(p. 439)

They argue that this issue is much more complex than the definitions for first generation and low-income lead us to believe. There is inherent harm scaffolded into the structures of higher education that force students to assimilate into dominant forms of cultural capital in order to succeed. The preparation students have before attending university can serve as a buffer to the adverse effects of deciphering the hidden curriculum but differ depending on the type of exposure students have to these systems before enrolling. Jack (2014) highlights that both subsets of students he describes as either doubly disadvantaged or privileged poor experience culture shock in college as they transition to largely white elite settings. But the doubly disadvantaged experience a delayed adjustment period as their experiences before college do not lend themselves to the college setting. He described two reasons for this outcome,

“[f]irst, high schools - both public and private with their regimented structure, are more like total institutions than colleges where students are expected to be both intellectually

and socially independent (Goffman 1961). High schools force students to interact and participate, while college permits greater freedom for self-definition. Second, the Privileged Poor's transition occurs during adolescence, a time when one is developmentally more malleable (Erikson 1980). At 17 and 18, traditional ages for entering college, students are more set in their ways. Additionally, the ecological influences on their development differed (Bronfenbrenner 1993). (Jack, 2014, p. 471)

The definitions used to define these populations are oftentimes too generic to serve many students who are considered within its target constituents. Low-income students struggle similarly to their first generation peers but have the additional burden of the lifelong ramifications of poverty that their peers may not experience. Based on the literature, practitioners should avoid assuming that all students are both low-income and first generation to best allow for students to articulate their needs and take ownership of their academic experience. All practitioners who serve these populations should push to reinforce the nuance of experience to best serve the students. While the terms first generation and low-income have become commonplace in most institutions, there has also been a consistent rise in assumptions-- whether for convenience or ignorance-- that define these populations and the experiences they have on college campuses. Only by acknowledging these biases and exploring more constructive ways to serve all students are first generation and low-income students seen as holistic students in postsecondary education, both with predetermined barriers to success and motivations to achieve their educational dreams.

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Appendix

Table 1A: U.S. Census bureau poverty status indicators created in 2021

Federal TRIO Programs Current-Year Low-Income Levels

(Effective **January 13, 2021** until further notice)

Size of Family Unit	48 Contiguous States, D.C., and Outlying Jurisdictions	Alaska	Hawaii
1	\$19,320	\$24,135	\$22,230
2	\$26,130	\$32,655	\$30,060
3	\$32,940	\$41,175	\$37,890
4	\$39,750	\$49,695	\$45,720
5	\$46,560	\$58,215	\$53,550
6	\$53,370	\$66,735	\$61,380
7	\$60,180	\$75,255	\$69,210
8	\$66,990	\$83,775	\$77,040

Table 1B: U.S. Census poverty Indicators created in 1994

Introduction

<i>Family size</i>	<i>Poverty threshold</i>	<i>125 percent of the poverty threshold</i>
1	\$7,710	\$9,638
2	9,976	12,470
3	11,821	14,776
4	15,141	18,926
5	17,900	22,375
6	20,235	25,294
7	22,923	28,654
8	25,427	31,784
9 or more	30,300	37,875