Straddling two worlds
Addressing the needs of first-generation scholars

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More than one third of PhD recipients identify as FG (2002)

Half of Black, Hispanic, and American Indian PhDs are FGs, while less than one quarter of Asian and White PhDs are FGs.

FG PhDs take longer to complete their degree, and graduate with more debt than their non FG peers.
Demographics of first-generations scholars

- Overrepresented in professional disciplines
- More likely to be male than female
- FGS are less likely to enter graduate school compared to their peers
- FGS tend to receive lower grades in college compared to their peers
Qualitative, exploratory study of first-generation doctoral students

Individual interviews with 20 self-identified FG S at two research institutions

Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and managed with Nvivo

Data analysis used constant comparative method (Miles & Huberman, 1994)
Findings on first-generation scholars

“Breaking the chain”

- Encountered social and family obstacles related to finances, gender, and geography
- FGS expressed a desire to pursue a different pathway from their parents or peers
- Escaping from low-wage or “dead-end” careers
Findings on first-generation scholars

“My father’s idea was, why should a girl go to college? She is just going to get married and stay home and be a mom.”

“My parents didn’t want me to go to college because of how much it would cost. The longer I stayed, and the more it cost, the more tension we had between us.”
“Knowing the rules”

- FGS expressed confusion over educational pathways.
- The ability to “learn as you go” was essential.
- FGS often felt that their peers knew the “rules of the game” while they did not.
Research on first-generation scholars

“You need to be aware of the rules of this game because once you get to a certain level, **there is no backing out**.”

“I didn’t know what to look for [in college or graduate school.] I just thought you went to the cheapest school. **Why would you do anything else?**”
Research on first-generation scholars

“Living in two worlds”

- FGS expressed tension over negotiating the world of academe
- Language and communication served as a divide between students and their families
- The length of degree programs was a source of concern
“My family is baffled by the idea of a PhD. They don’t understand why I can’t get a real job.”

“My family would have preferred I get my degree in something practical, like accounting, something where I can get a job close to them.”
Research on first-generation scholars

“Seeking support”

- A critical factor in FGS success is support from faculty, peers, and other mentors.
- Financial support was a recurrent theme, particularly in light of large undergraduate debt.
“A lot of other students are too intimidated to ask a question because they don’t want to seem stupid. I’m like, whatever, I’ll ask, I’m already at a deficit.”

“The only way I am able to survive is on loans. So when I get out of this, I’m going to have a ton of debt.”
Implications for first-generation scholars

- Being FG is an invisible, unrecognized, yet highly influential component of a student’s life.
- Perceived economic benefits and skills associated with a discipline can be a significant consideration for FGS.
Implications for first-generation scholars

- It is not simply being a FGS, but other considerations such as race, gender, class, etc. are important.
- Not all FGS are from the same socio-economic class.
Implications for FG postdoctoral scholars

- Support in navigating the transition between the post-doc and a faculty career
- Support in developing skills that apply outside the faculty role
- Advocacy in terms of finances related to debt load, post-doc salary, etc.