

“Is that paper really due today?”: differences in first-generation and traditional college students’ understandings of faculty expectations

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Abstract Success in college is not simply a matter of students demonstrating academic ability. In addition, students must master the “college student” role in order to understand instructors’ expectations and apply their academic skills effectively to those expectations. This article uses data from focus groups to examine the fit between university faculty members’ expectations and students’ understanding of those expectations. Parallel discussions among groups of faculty and groups of students highlight important differences regarding issues of time management and specific aspects of coursework. We find definite incongruities between faculty and student perspectives and identify differences between traditional and first-generation college students. We argue that variations in cultural capital, based on parents’ educational experiences, correspond to important differences in each group’s mastery of the student role and, thus, their ability to respond to faculty expectations. The conclusion discusses the theoretical and practical implications of considering role mastery a form of cultural capital.

Keywords College student adjustment · Cultural capital · Faculty expectations · First-generation students · Focus group methodology · Role mastery · University retention

Introduction

As a step toward understanding the divergent perspectives of faculty and students, this article investigates each group’s perceptions of the factors involved in student success at the university level. We propose that, in addition to academic skills, university success requires mastery of the “college student” role. Mastering the college student role enables young people to understand their instructors’ expectations and to apply their existing skills

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to meet those expectations successfully. Thus, this article examines the fit between faculty members' expectations and their students' understanding of those expectations.

We propose that an individual's understanding of the "college student role" is a critical element in explaining student success at the university. Because relatively little is known about these kinds of "implicit expectations" and "tacit understandings," we investigate these issues from a qualitative perspective. By comparing separate faculty and student focus group discussions, we highlight the similarities and differences between faculty members' expectations for students and students' understanding of those expectations. In addition, we examine whether different subgroups of students experience these issues in different ways by comparing how first-generation students' experiences with faculty expectations differ from more traditional students' experiences.

Background

First-generation student retention

Why do some students succeed in college while others do not? Specifically, why are some types of students predictably more likely to graduate from college, while others consistently pose "retention" problems? In particular, "first-generation college students" pose notable retention concerns. These are students the USA Government's Educational Opportunities Program defines as those with neither parent having completed a four-year college degree in the USA by the time that student entered college. Statistical data show that the concerns are well-founded. First generation students are less likely to graduate than peers who have at least one parent with a college education (National Center for Educational Statistics 2005).

Current explanations of college students' success or failure tend to emphasize the complex relationships between the characteristics of institutions and the characteristics of individual students (e.g., Terenzini et al. 1996). In one of the best known general models of student success, Tinto (1975, 1993) proposes that new students start with pre-enrollment packages of individual attributes, previous schooling, and family support. These have a direct effect on the students' desire to complete a degree, which Tinto refers to as "academic integration." These variables also affect the students' desire to get a degree at a particular institution, or what Tinto calls "social integration."

Researchers have used Tinto's model to show that social integration and academic integration are the best predictors of first-generation college student retention rates (e.g., Elkins et al. 2000). Even though Tinto's work provides a general framework for understanding student retention (see Kraemer's 1997 review), most subsequent research on retention among first-generation students emphasizes the difficulties with social rather than academic integration (e.g., Hurtado and Carter 1997). Our understanding of the impacts of academic integration is further limited by the fact that it is almost always measured solely by grade point averages (GPAs) (Weidman 1989), without investigating the ways that other forms of academic integration influence grades.

Unless we assume that grades are completely determined by prior preparation and personal skills, there must be other elements of academic integration that influence GPAs. For example, at least one study (Bean and Metzger 1985) found that other academic variables, such as advising and study habits, directly affected GPA for "non-traditional" students. While adding other variables that are more closely linked to actual student–faculty interactions may improve the explanatory capacity of quantitative models, adding

variables does little to help us understand the broader processes involved in academic integration. In particular, we need to investigate whether students from different backgrounds (such as first generation and more traditional students) experience different problems concerning academic integration. To address these questions, we turn to a theoretical perspective based on a revitalized version of sociological role theory, which connects the issue of academic integration to mastery of the college student role.

Roles as resources and cultural capital

Our approach to students' acquisition and mastery of the college student role builds on the classic, Symbolic Interactionist version of role theory (e.g., Becker 1963; Mead 1934). In doing so, we rely on a recent series of theoretical developments that emphasize the use of "roles as resources" (Baker and Faulkner 1991; Callero 1986, 1994, 2003; Collier 2000, 2001). According to this approach, roles serve as *resources* that individuals use to pursue their goals through interactions with others. In the case of higher education, students who arrive at the university with a greater mastery of the college student role possess an important resource for recognizing what their instructors expect of them and for responding appropriately to those expectations.

Collier's (2000, 2001) Differentiated Model of Identity Acquisition expands on the idea of roles as resources by proposing that there are multiple, alternative conceptions for broad societal roles, such as "college student." For example, students at different schools, a community college, a large public urban university, or an elite private university must typically deal with different sets of expectations in order to be recognized as "successful" at their respective schools. Having differentiated versions of the same role allows individuals to generate more effective responses to the actual circumstances they experience as they pursue their goals (for example, when students perform the version of the student role required by their university or by a professor).

This revitalized version of role theory underscores the importance of *role mastery*: the ability to perform increasingly customized or context-specific versions of a particular role. This form of mastery applies to both halves of the distinction that Ralph Turner (1978) makes between "role playing" and "role making." Role playing occurs when an individual in a new or uncertain situation uses an existing role standard to perform a "conventional" version of the role in question, as when a college freshman concentrates on meeting a professor's standards, as a step toward learning the college student role. In contrast, role making occurs when an individual develops her or his own "version" of the role, usually as a result of a series of previous performances of that role, as when a college student negotiates with a professor to create a "reading and conference" or "directed studies course" as an alternative to a regularly offered class. Individuals tend to start out with "role playing" (enacting a standardized version of a role), then, as their level of expertise increases, they do more "role making" (developing their personal version of that role). Because role playing and role making typically work together, individuals may develop greater mastery through both role playing—by increasing the number of different versions of role that they can perform—and role making—by increasing their ability to create new but acceptable responses to role standards.

The differentiated model of role acquisition makes it possible to describe a more detailed version of role mastery, based on the realization that there are multiple role standards for the same role. When individuals successfully learn how to recognize and respond to different standards for a role, they develop a *higher level of role mastery* and

this increased expertise gives them more options for subsequent performances of that role. For example, success in college requires that students must cope with broad variation in the standards that different professors will use in assessing their performances. Just as in the earlier example of different types of colleges and universities having different expectations for their students, different professors within any one school will have different expectations. Thus, the mastery of multiple versions of a role serves as a resource enabling people to accomplish their desired goals—perhaps getting a better grade in a course or graduating on time.

A different aspect of role mastery, which has received more attention in the literature on expertise, is the need to acquire both explicit and implicit knowledge. Within the field of education, Michael Eraut has pursued this topic with regard to both teacher education as professional development (1994) and education in general (2000). According to Eraut, even though schools are the “archetypical context for formal learning,” explicitly stated knowledge about the content of the curriculum “is only one part of the process” (2000:131). From this standpoint, students’ success in college depends not only upon their explicit understanding of course content but also their implicit understanding of how to demonstrate that knowledge in ways that will satisfy each professor’s expectations. Hence, even when two students have an equivalent mastery of the explicit content of their course work, the one who has a better understanding of their professors’ implicit expectations will be more likely to succeed.

This conceptualization of role mastery, or increasing expertise as a *resource₂* is closely related to Bourdieu’s (1973, 1977, 1984) theory of cultural capital. Cultural capital can be defined as “proficiency in and familiarity with dominant cultural codes and practices...” (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997:573). And, according to Bourdieu, the educational system is the primary vehicle by which the culture of the dominant class is both transmitted and rewarded. Dumais (2002) notes that while schools require students to have the ability to recognize, receive, and internalize the values of the dominant culture, they do not necessarily provide students with opportunities to do so. Instead, “the acquisition of cultural capital and subsequent access to academic rewards depend upon the cultural capital passed down by the family, which in turn, is largely dependent on social class” (Dumais 2002:44).

Conceptualizing role mastery or expertise as cultural capital addresses a major issue that has arisen in discussion of Bourdieu’s work. One major criticism of many current applications of cultural capital theory is that it is unclear how a conceptualization of cultural capital as “upper class values” or “knowledge of beaux arts” directly translates into social advantage in interactions (Kingston 2001:94). Lareau and Weininger (2003) have responded to this critique by focusing on the three key elements in the reproduction of cultural capital: (1) interactions where authorities evaluate individuals, (2) the standards that authorities use in their evaluation, (3) differences in the cultural resources that individuals bring to their interactions with authorities. Stated in terms of mastering both explicit and implicit aspects of the college student role, this points to the importance of: (1) situations in which instructors evaluate student performance, (2) the assumptions and expectations that instructors use, and (3) the resources that students have for recognizing and responding to their instructors’ expectations.

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model that summarizes many of these ideas by distinguishing between learning the college student role and learning course content as two important influences on student performance. The lower path of this model reflects a traditional achievement model of education, where a student’s academic ability determines the understanding of course material, which then determines academic performance. Most

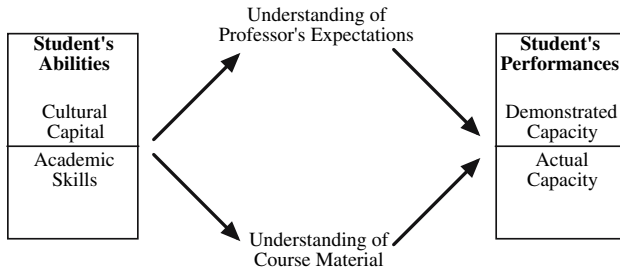


Fig. 1 Conceptual model

of the activities along this path consist of what Eraut (2000) would summarize as formal learning, involving knowledge that is typically explicit and codified. The upper path in the model expands on this traditional model by including the “Fit Between Faculty and Student Expectations” as an additional influence that mediates the relationship between students’ academic skills and their academic performances. Eraut (2000) would summarize these activities as informal learning, emphasizing knowledge that is typically personal and implicit. According to this model, the ability to understand the course material, as captured by the lower path, is necessary, but, alone, it is not sufficient as the source of a student’s performance. In addition, mastery of the college student role—in the form of understanding the professor’s expectations—is also necessary to demonstrate knowledge of course materials. In particular, in a comparison between two students with an equivalent understanding of the course material, the one who has a better understanding of the faculty member’s expectations will perform better.

In keeping with this dual-path approach, the model also distinguishes between two components of “Students’ Resources” and two aspects of “Students’ Performances.” In terms of Resources, *academic skills* refers to prior preparation for acquiring content related knowledge, including such essentially technical skills as the ability to read college level texts, and so on. In contrast, *cultural capital* refers to preexisting knowledge about interacting successfully in academic settings, including such essentially social skills as the ability to recognize and respond to the standards faculty members use when they evaluate assignments. Similarly, Performances are divided between *actual capacity*, which refers to the full set of what the student “knows and understands” with regard to the course materials, and *demonstrated capacity*, which refers to the ability to express what the student “knows and understands.” Needless to say, this demonstrated capacity is what instructors examine when assigning grades.

The model’s emphasis on the influence of cultural capital suggests the way that social background affects the ability to perform the college student role. Eraut makes a similar point in his discussion of how individual and social differences affect the development of expertise, by noting: “Individuals do not enter a given setting with identical cognitive resources,” and “the setting rarely treats them in a completely uniform way” (2000:131). For example, a first-generation student or a student who has recently transferred from a two-year college to a four-year university may be unprepared when the expectations for written work go beyond good grammar to require the appropriate use of sources in addition. Similarly, such students may encounter difficulties when their professors expect them to demonstrate “critical thinking” rather than simply presenting logically consistent arguments.

In contrast, students from a more traditional background enter the university with a level of cultural capital that makes it easier for them to become “role experts.” Not only are they more familiar with higher education from listening to family members’ academic histories, but they also are likely to have more appropriate approaches for dealing with teachers and other educational authorities because of parental coaching. In many ways, their parents have been preparing these traditional students for college ever since they first entered school. Traditional students’ advantage in mastering the college student role is, thus, an example of how differences in cultural capital can perpetuate differences in family educational attainment (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

These initial differences between traditional and non-traditional students further affect a student’s ability to develop mastery of the college student role. In particular, the cultural capital that traditional students possess can give them a head start in the “pattern recognition” that allows them to identify professors’ expectations and to respond to them effectively. For example, both traditional and first-generation students may have a general awareness that they will have to “do the student role” differently in their science classes as compared to their liberal arts classes. But any advantage traditional students have in understanding this distinction will provide a resource for further “differentiation” of these two sets of expectations, leading to more effective strategies for dealing with these differences. In addition, traditional students will be more likely to recognize how professors’ expectations may differ from one liberal arts class to another. At the same time that traditional students are expanding their role mastery to develop a fine-tuned understanding of each professor’s expectations, first-generation students may still be struggling simply to understand the university’s expectations “in general.”

Overall, this conceptual model draws attention to the fact that success in higher education is not solely a matter of students demonstrating their academic abilities. As Lecouteur and Delfabbro (2001) note, however, researchers have paid relatively little attention to students’ and teachers’ understandings of and standards for teaching and learning, leading them to call for more “detailed discussion with those who are actively involved in teaching and learning practices” (2001:233). We address this need by presenting qualitative data that compares the perspectives of students and professors, especially with regard to the upper path in our model, which emphasizes the more explicit expectations associated with mastery of the college student role. In addition, we examine differences between first-generation students and traditional students with more educated parents, especially in terms of the ability to recognize and respond to faculty members’ expectations, regardless of a student’s actual understanding of the course material.

Method

Setting

Portland State University (PSU) is a 23,000-student public university, located in Portland, Oregon, USA. Portland State is an urban university that serves students from a diverse range of family backgrounds. According to 2000 and 2001 data from Student Support Services/Educational Opportunity Program (2000), 18 percent of PSU students are first-generation students, and of that group, 12% qualify as both low income and first-generation students.

Design

This study used two layers of segmentation (Krueger and Casey 2000). The first split was between faculty and students. For the faculty, we conducted two focus groups with instructors who primarily taught undergraduate courses in either business or the liberal arts and sciences. Fifteen faculty members participated in the focus groups. The decision to limit our sample to undergraduate faculty from these two colleges was based on the premise that these faculty members shared a common group of general academic expectations for students, which might differ greatly from faculty in the Fine Arts or Engineering.

The second layer of segmentation in our design separated different kinds of undergraduate students into two sets of focus groups: first-generation students and those from more traditional, highly educated backgrounds (students with at least one college graduate parent). We conducted a total of eight student groups, including six groups of first-generation students and two groups of students from more traditional backgrounds. Sixty-three students participated in the eight focus groups. We collected more data from non-traditional students than traditional because, as a group, non-traditional students were quite diverse, for example, some were returning to college as older adults while others came from immigrant backgrounds with English as a second language. As with the faculty, the students came from either business or the liberal arts and sciences.

We developed a parallel set of interview questions for the faculty and student groups with identical questions for all of the student groups. The goal was to hear about both the faculty members' and the students' expectations of what students should be able to do in freshman- and sophomore-level classes. Group interviews can be especially useful for investigating taken-for-granted aspects of people's ideas, because each participant's thinking is stimulated by what others in the group say (Morgan 1997, 2002). Additionally, using parallel sets of discussion questions allowed us to compare, on the one hand, how closely the faculty members' expectations matched the students' responses, and, on the other hand, how closely the first-generation responses matched traditional students'.

The interview questions covered three basic areas. First, we asked about the basic priorities that each group recognized, with regard to students' schoolwork. Next, we asked how students were supposed to know about these expectations. Finally, we asked about the kinds of problems that students encountered through not understanding expectations and how students should solve those problems.

Results

The conceptual model that we presented in Fig. 1 divided students' Academic Performance into two pathways, a lower path that emphasizes the explicit understanding of course material and an upper path that emphasizes both the implicit and explicit understanding of faculty expectations. It is, of course, the upper path, related to understanding faculty expectations, that interests us, and our model points to *three* interrelated issues. First, how do faculty members understand and express their own expectations? Second, to what extent do students in general understand and accept the faculty's expectations? Finally, how do first generation and more traditional students either overlap or differ in their ability to recognize and respond to faculty expectations? These three issues form the outline for this section. We begin with the broader question of how well expectations are recognized and understood (that is, the first part of the upper path in Fig. 1). After that, we will consider the

specific consequences of successes and failures in understanding expectations (or, the second part of the upper path in Fig. 1).

The faculty's expectations

Faculty were quite articulate and explicit about the issues that they encountered in dealing with students' ability to understand and follow their expectations. Although there were distinct disciplinary differences among faculty members that reflected the substantive content in the lower path of our model, almost every instructor in these focus groups shared their frustrations with students' difficulties in comprehending their basic expectations, which make up the upper path of our model. This was especially true when dealing with relatively new college students. For example, in the later section of our results, we present two cases where students had similar difficulties in recognizing and responding appropriately to professors' expectations about writing assignments in two quite different disciplinary contexts. While the details of these assignments were quite different—in a science course and a general education course—the underlying issue was the same. Each student was unable to recognize what constituted an appropriate reference source.

Faculty members' concerns regarding students' problems in meeting their expectations fell into three broad categories: workload and priorities, the explicitness of expectations and assignments, and issues related to communication and problem solving.

Expectations about workload and priorities

Faculty members began with very clear expectations about the amount of time students should commit to coursework. Both faculty groups discussed the university's published standard that each hour of class time should be matched by two to 3 h of work outside the classroom. Thus, these faculty members reported telling their students such things as: "You need to allow at least 2 h outside of class (to read, study and do assignments) for every hour you spend in class... I say [for a standard four credit course] you have to have 8 h a week outside of class, or you're not going to make it."

The professors also emphasized that students need to prioritize getting an education. They had strong beliefs that students should allocate the proper amount of time to mastering schoolwork rather than trying to fit it in around their other commitments. As one professor noted:

We are an urban campus. We're designed to deal with people's life crises, but I think the great gift you give to them is to share we're all limited by 24 h a day, 7 days a week. You make your priorities and I tell them all the time, I say, "I'm not in judgment of you, it's your choice and I'm just here to help you get a preview of what the consequences will be from this choice."

According to the faculty members, students needed to recognize the amount of time their schoolwork would require, and they needed to prioritize school above other commitments, so that they can meet expectations. According to both first-generation and traditional students, their time commitments inevitably reflected the amount of time that they had available, rather than the amount of time it would take to master the course material.

In addition, the faculty members consistently told students that college level coursework would be more demanding than what they had experienced before. Students who failed to understand this expectation might not allocate sufficient time to master key course skills, or

to identify and retain key areas of content. This is illustrated by one faculty member's comment:

One of the things that I tell them is that the work at the university is going to be different than the work that they have probably had at the community college... You can tell them, but they have to kind of go through the process to see just what you're referring to up front. Until they actually experience it, I don't think they fully get it.

Explicitness of expectations and assignments

From the faculty's own point of view, they had clear standards, yet they also reported that students repeatedly expressed a desire that they be as explicit as possible. Even though faculty could recognize that their taken-for-granted expectations were not obvious to students, they tended to express this as part of a larger series of problems that they summarized as "not following directions." As one professor remarked: "I do have a few who write an excellent paper but it's not what they were assigned to write, and that's always difficult to grade."

For the faculty, the course syllabus played a major role in conveying their expectations. In discussing how explicit the syllabus should be, several professors reported a general tendency for syllabi to become more detailed, in order to address problems they had experienced in past classes. In response, many of them added material based on "the problems that we run into each term—we keep adding information to our syllabus, to try and make it clear from the very beginning." Another professor commented, "I think one of the reasons that we've become so concrete and structured and put so much information, basic information in is ... when you get comments like, 'Um, oh did you say that was due today?'"

Sometimes communicating expectations clearly was not enough, however. In particular, a continuing source of frustration for the faculty was that students did not pay attention to specific expectations associated with their particular course. As one faculty member noted, "They can't use rules that they have applied across all courses. They have to use the rule in the system that I put out for them and sometimes that's different."

One area to which faculty devoted considerable attention was the explicitness of their expectations concerned written assignments. The focus groups also produced several discussions about shared standards with regard to writing issues. These included expectations that students should: have basic writing skills, such as, spelling, sentence structure, and demonstrate a coherent use of paragraphs; know how to put a paper together on a computer; and, be able to cite references in their papers using accepted guidelines. Yet these expectations were not always met. As one professor commented, "I made an assumption they knew [APA or MLA style] and most people don't. So I use a packet handout now." Another professor echoed these same sentiments:

I spend a lot of time going over in class, "This is what I'm expecting. " There's a handout detailing exactly what I'm looking for, and for the most part that's not a problem for students. The first time...I didn't spend so much time in the class during lectures saying "When you write your paper this is what you need to be looking for. " When I first had the assignment it was very problematic, people didn't get it, they didn't get the paper at all... so I have kind of changed and made the lecture more explicit.

Expectations related to communication and problem solving

All three sets of focus groups agreed that it was essential to improve faculty–student communication in order to increase the likelihood of student success, but there was much less agreement about whose responsibility it was to initiate those conversations or when this should happen. Both traditional and first-generation students agreed that the student should take the initiative and introduce himself to the professor to try to establish some rapport. Both groups of students also agreed that they hoped this would make communication easier in the future.

In contrast, the professors felt that the real issue was the students' failure to communicate about problems when they encountered them. When students did not ask about the kinds of problems that professors suspected they were having, the professors would use lecture time to offer tips about how to get better grades on assignments. Examples included: following the assignment instructions, attending class for additional information about assignments, getting help before the assignment was due instead of asking to rewrite the assignment after poor grade, and so on.

One specific expectation that faculty members shared with regard to problem solving was that students should take advantage of professors' office hours to make contact and get their questions answered. But as one professor pointed out:

I tell them, "One of the reasons I put my office hours down is because I sit in that office waiting for you to come and talk to me. If you chose not to, that's okay but I am here for you... [I tell them,] this is where I am. I sit there. I can sit there correcting your paper or I can talk to you. If you have questions about any of this, come to me. That's the time."

As this last example shows, faculty members expressed considerable frustration over the fact that their continued efforts to communicate their expectations often failed to produce the desired results. Thus, faculty members not only felt that they had clear expectations but also that they worked hard to share them. Yet, at the same time they also recognized that the things they said did not seem to mean the same things to students as they did to them. The next section demonstrates some of the elements of this "disconnect" by examining the students' perspective on these same expectations.

Students' general expectations

There are many ways that both traditional and first generation students shared the same general perspective on faculty expectations. In some cases, they either discounted or ignored the importance of the things that professors said; in other cases, they systematically reinterpreted what their professors said and thus "misunderstood" the message that faculty members were attempting to send. This section compares students' shared understanding of faculty members' expectations to the actual faculty expectations, using the same topic areas as the previous section. Then, the section following this will highlight the ways that first generation students' expectations were different from those of more traditional students.

Expectations about workload and priorities

Both the first-generation and traditional students felt that the actual time they had available for schoolwork should be the determining factor for the basic priorities. Students, thus,

based their ideas about what is an “appropriate” amount of work to put into a class, on the amount of time they felt they had available, rather than on any sense of how much time might actually needed to master the material.

You get a lot more out of it if you can do all the reading but sometimes its impossible when you have four classes and each one has like hours of reading everyday or every class... In some of my classes I have so much reading that I just throw other stuff out the window.

According to both groups of students, their time commitments inevitably reflected the time they had available, and not faculty members’ expectations that they should think in terms of the effort needed to master the course material. In contrast to the faculty expectation that students should “prioritize their education” over other commitments, students emphasized the need to fit school work in with their outside jobs, family demands, and other aspects of their lives.

So it might be important [for professors] to understand that there is stuff that goes on outside the university, like family responsibilities, cultural expectations, and that can have a real effect on how you perform in school, so take some of that into account.

Explicitness of expectations and assignments

Both sets of students agreed that they wished professors would be more explicit—despite faculty perceptions that they already went to a great deal of effort to be unequivocal about their expectations. The syllabus was one area where these disagreements were most clearly visible, as summarized in this student’s comment:

Here you are handed a sometimes 2, 3 page “thing” and its got all this information on it and, at times, teachers don’t go over it, they just hand it to a bunch of students on the assumption that they know what it is.

The same general pattern was apparent with regard to expectations about writing assignments. Both types of students agreed that they did not receive enough detailed information how to write, including in the university’s freshman level general education courses, where this kind of instruction supposedly occurred. Notably, students described these classes as including many writing assignments but little actual instruction about writing. Students, thus, expressed their own frustrations about the factors that affected the evaluations they received on specific assignments, including the format for papers: “Some teachers don’t say and they just assume that you know, and you find out after you type it, ‘No, what are you thinking?’”

Expectations related to communication and problem solving

In contrast to the faculty’s view of communication as centered on problem solving, students tended to discuss their communication with faculty largely in terms of relationship building. Both traditional and first-generation students agreed that the student should take the initiative and introduce himself to the professor and try to establish some rapport. Both groups expressed the hope that this would make communication easier in the future, which was reflected in students’ advice about how to use office hours.

You should schedule an office hour visit with a professor to get acquainted with the professor, that would speed up a lot, that would help you to understand, and see the differences in professors and professors' expectations. That would be GOLD if you went to office hours just to say "Hi."

In contrast, other students who used office hours in ways that were closer to faculty members' expectations learned the advantage of this approach.

If I actually take the time and say, "I don't get it, explain this to me," they'll normally sit down and explain it, but it's more of a personal responsibility. If you sit in the back and you don't ask questions, and you just let the term go by without ever addressing this problem, then you are going to be finding yourself not a happy person when your grades come.

Despite faculty members' self-proclaimed efforts to be as unambiguous as possible about their expectations, it is clear that students, in general, often had difficulty interpreting those expectations. These problems were even more severe for first-generation students than for traditional students, as the next section demonstrates.

First generation students' expectations

The previous section demonstrated the problems that students overall had in understanding faculty expectations. In addition, there were aspects of the college experience that traditional students took for granted that were distinctly more problematic for first generation students.

Thus, the discussions in the first generation student focus groups were filled with tales of their frustrations in trying to deal with faculty members' implicit expectations in each of the basic areas we have been describing.

Expectations about workload and priorities

Although both sets of students complained about the level of work expected, first generation students reported markedly more problems related to time management and placing priority on the time they devoted to their classes. Faculty members also reported that this prioritization was one of the expectations that was hardest for first-generation students to accept. Indeed, several first-generation students volunteered that they were advised to be more realistic about time commitments, but they still tended to overcommit. As a result, faculty reported that first-generation students were especially likely to have time management problems, and this group of students confirmed that they had received advising, specifically about time management issues. In contrast, this issue did not come up in the traditional students' conversations.

First-generation students carried this topic a step further by complaining that their additional commitments created more problems with time management and also made it more difficult to solve these problems. In addition, the first-generation students noted that they had fewer outside resources to help them deal with these demands.

I think it's important for professors to know, especially for first-generation students, there is a lot of stuff that goes on outside the university that does not go on with students that have parents with Master's and PhD.'s, even Bachelor's degrees. [They]

don't have a lot of resources, they don't have a lot of people they can ask questions from outside the university.

Explicitness of expectations and assignments

Although both sets of students wanted faculty to be plainer about their expectations in general, and assignments in particular, first generation students' wanted even more detail than their more traditional counterparts. As one first-generation student put it:

Some teachers expect you to read every word in the book and to be able to pick out all the important information yourself, and some are only expecting you to skim through some of the books and aren't going to ask any specific dates, or specific information. And if you don't know which to plan for, you can't manage your time as well.

First generation students desire for greater clarity was especially apparent in their discussions of the class syllabus. Some of this preference for precision is due to the fact that these students are less familiar with the concept of a syllabus or the purpose it serves:

I had no clue what the syllabus was or the importance of the syllabus. I remember just seeing a bunch of writing, a bunch of words, a bunch of recommendations and expectations, but it didn't register to me what it was, what the importance was.

In terms of format, first-generation students said things like, "I expect the syllabus to be very detailed," while traditional students preferred a syllabus that was "short, concise, simple...not something that when you want to refer to a syllabus you have to read a paragraph and figure out where everything is." Thus, one first-generation student noted "If it's not one that's detailed, then chances are it goes into the trash or I never look at it again." Specific areas where first-generation students asked for more detail included: how to take notes, descriptions of assignments, and specifics about tests. For example, one student queried: "if it is an essay exam, does the professor want names and dates or just key ideas"? They also wanted information about the costs of books and the value of class participation. First-generation students offered some suggestions to faculty about how to make the syllabus more "user-friendly," such as "printing the syllabus on colored paper" to keep it from getting mixed up with other papers. They recommended visual techniques to emphasize key sections of the syllabus, using "bullets, bold face, or some other font to show what's really important, to outline certain things, because sometimes they'll give you so much information I don't know what's pertinent or not."

A related issue concerned the extent to which students used the syllabus versus personal observation as a source of information about the faculty member's expectations. Faculty members reported that they routinely communicated a fundamental expectation that students should learn about coursework both from reading the syllabus and from listening to the professor's explanation of the syllabus during class. Yet, analysis of data from the two sets of student focus groups revealed consistent differences between traditional and first-generation students in terms of what they used as the primary source of class related information. Traditional students seemed either to focus on the syllabus or to see the information from the professor and the syllabus as interchangeable. In contrast, first-generation students tended to rely almost exclusively on information they acquired from hearing, observing, and interpreting the actions of professors—especially their initial explanations of the course syllabus.

I just try to listen for what they say. I try to listen for those key words “This is what I want from you.” Or, “This is what I’m going to want from you.” And after that I just start taking notes.

This difference in perspective carried over into first-generation and more traditional students’ attempts to understand how their professor would deal with grading issues—a topic that the students tended to discuss in terms of the “strictness” of their professors. Here is one first-generation student’s approach:

I look for how the professor is dressed, the first thing...Like, if he’s got a tie and some slacks on, or I have professors who wear a t-shirt and jeans, and they’re usually the loose ones

In contrast, two traditional students remarked:

What I look for in the syllabus is the strictness or the laxness of the instructor, whether they are very strict about their due dates, their guidelines.

Whether they can say it’s okay if you’re not here on certain days because attendance is optional, that’s lax on their part. And it gives you a lot of discretion as far as how you want to be involved in the class.

One final area where first-generation students had a different perspective regarding accuracy and detail was in terms of written assignments. In particular, first-generation students expressed a great deal of frustration over the more mechanical aspects of their written work. While first-generation students spent a considerable amount of time discussing their confusion about the importance of issues such as spelling, grammar, and how to format papers, this topic was almost absent from the traditional students’ focus groups. First-generation students felt that they could not do their best work unless their professors were specific about how work should be done, including “the formats for the papers, knowing whether they like it to be double spaced or single spaced, that kind of thing.” Another first-generation student summarized the overall problem as follows:

It seems like a lot of people had more of an understanding of what was expected in college than I did. When I came in I didn’t know [about] MLA, APA writing styles... I just didn’t know anything about it.

Expectations related to communication and problem solving

First-generation students also reported a unique concern about student–teacher contacts, noting that how a professor spoke to the class during lecture directly influenced how willing they were to approach the professor with a question. Two specific aspects of this barrier were mentioned. The first involved professors’ overuse of discipline specific jargon. As one first-generation student put it, “I have had some professors that act like you’re their colleagues, and they just talk to you using all this jargon ... assuming you already know it.” The second concern had to do with the level of vocabulary the professor used in lecturing: “I find that some instructors are more knowledgeable, and they tend to do more talking and they’re going over everyone’s head. And even when you ask that question, they tend not to rephrase it ... to where we can understand it, or else they add on more words to it but you still haven’t helped me understand it.”

For many first-generation students, problems at level of vocabulary and style of speaking were just the most obvious indicators of how different college was for them. It is worth noting that some faculty members were aware of this difference, and one professor particularly noted that for first generation students:

... my expectations are almost cryptic in the beginning, it feels like, until they have some experience, it's like I'm speaking another language... I'm saying one thing but I'm pretty sure they're hearing it differently, at least it feels that way.

That professor's awareness does not compare, however, with the confusion, and even fear, that first-generation students routinely expressed.

I'm 25 years old and I'm married, and in other realms, I'm completely self-confident, but in this realm, it is completely new to me and my entire family and what I've known and the jobs that I've had... It's college.

Coming to school was out of my comfort zone, and talking to anybody my whole first year was out of the question... It was so scary. I'd heard from my whole family, when you go to college it's a whole different class of people, and I had a whole intimidation thing, and I didn't talk to any of the professors.

Understandably, these communication barriers carried over into the direct contact that first-generation students had with faculty members:

I didn't understand what office hours were all about... I mean, the office hours are there on the syllabus, "Ok, what's that got to do with anything?" What am I supposed to do with "office hours?" I didn't know that a teacher was available at a certain time for me to come and talk to if I had a problem. I didn't know that as a freshman or a sophomore, even though it is right there on the damn syllabus, I didn't know it.

As this section has shown, first generation students' difficulties in understanding professors' expectations were more extensive than the problems encountered by more traditional students. It is important to remember, however, that this is only the first half of the upper path in our model. We conclude our results by examining the consequences of this difference in ability to understand faculty members' expectations.

Impacts on students' performances

This final section examines the all-too-predictable outcomes of students' failures to understand the expectations of their professors. In doing so, we pay particular attention to the unique problems that first-generation students had. One area where first-generation students were especially likely to encounter problems was through broad failures to understand faculty's expectations about the basic features of student performance. The following examples, especially, demonstrate how problems with the students' final grades originated in a failure to pay sufficient attention to material that was explicitly contained in the course syllabus.

The teacher seemed at the beginning of the class, she seemed really lax... And so at the end of the term, I came out with a really bad grade, and I didn't feel that my work was, I didn't feel that I deserved the grade that I got. She gave me a D, a C maybe, but honestly I felt I would have deserved a B for the quality work that I did. I did

miss about 5 classes every term, so that is pretty bad, but basically that's why she gave me a D because of each term I missed 5 days, because I pushed the limit I guess, and when I went and talked to her about it, she said, "Your work is real good but you missed this many days, and that counts against your grade."

The assignments were very simple, two simple papers, two books, one book was the main book, but if you wanted additional data, you can use the next book, one was "book X" and the other was "Book Y" and I was supposed to use "Book Y" for my paper. But instead, I went to the Internet and gathered all this information, and wrote my paper—more like free writing, and it didn't work, I got an "F" for the first paper... One big problem I had at that time was I was never able to face an instructor. I was never able to come to see her after the class, or actually go to the office to meet with the instructor, I was afraid, I don't know why. It was silly, but I was afraid, new to the authority, she was always dressed in suit, and dressed nice. The fact is, I never came to see her... Then my second paper, the last one, I followed directions, however, I didn't "meet the expectations of the class," so I was given a "D" for that paper. It was just a week ago when I came to see the teacher after two quarters, I came to meet with the instructor, the teacher, to find out why was I given such a low grade for the papers. I asked her if she singled me out because I was the only Mexican in the class, and she said, "No, I did not single you out, you simply did not follow the instructions, you simply did not meet the expectations of the class." But then it was too late.

Beyond these broader problems with expectations, first-generation students were also more likely to run into difficulty with specific assignments. In some cases, as in the first example below, the misunderstanding is so basic that it might apply to any course. In contrast, the second example illustrates the kind of discipline-specific expectations that students must master in their coursework.

The assignment we had said, "write about some field experience" and I literally wrote the two page thing out. It said "write" and I took it literally and wrote it out, and then I got a note back that said "see me." It was in red and everything, and I went and she was like "you were supposed to type this up." But the instructions were to "write." I wasn't sure what she wanted.

I am taking biology... I do not have experience in writing, and the main thing is that they require writing for research papers, and I'm expecting doing a lot of work trying to figure out how to do that. I did two papers already and... He said, "You have to go back and do it again, this is not scientific writing"... I thought it was scientific because it was from a biology textbook, and I did study at [community college], and he said "No, this is not scientific writing." So it is really hard to see what they want because they already see it, they already know it, they see what I don't.

As this student's last remark makes clear, even when the problem is due to the specific expectations that go with assignments in a particular discipline, the student's interpretation is that this is just one instance of a more general problem. The same principle is apparent in two additional examples, the first from another science course and the second dealing with essay tests:

I transferred from [community college, and chemistry is taught in a different way here [at the university]. And what I noticed the first time I went to the class, the teacher was nice, and I said I like this class. So I followed every single step, I tried to figure out what she wanted me to learn. I didn't know the tests were done on the basis

of mathematical skills, because my experience is half and half—multiple choice and mathematical skills—so when I did the first quiz I almost failed because I didn't understand the way she put the questions. The way she taught the class was different than what I saw on the test. We went like that the whole term. I thought I worked hard, and even though the exams were fair, I did not pass, and it was difficult for me to understand why.

If you don't know what kind of style the professor is looking for, that can be really difficult. You don't know what they're looking for, how they're going to grade it, because essays are totally open ended, and you might have totally different things that you thought were important that you put in there. And they didn't say, "I wanted dates, I wanted names, I wanted books that you read this in," and if you don't know that ahead of time, that can be a real setback.

Taken together, the various sections of these results have demonstrated the importance of understanding professors' expectations for students' academic success at college. As our "Two Path" model of student success argues, developing expertise in and mastering the college student role can be every bit as important as learning the substantive content in coursework. It is also clear that different students enter the university with very different levels of mastery for the student role. In particular, we have shown, in some detail, the difficulties that first generation students experience as they try simultaneously to master the content of their courses while also learning how to perform the basic college student role.

Discussion and conclusions

Higher education is a critical pathway to achieving occupational success and social status in all industrialized countries. Over the past 30 years in the USA, the value of a college degree has increased dramatically, while, at the same time, the earnings gap between those who hold bachelor's degrees and those who do not has continued to widen (U.S. Department of Education 1998). Therefore understanding all of the factors that may affect postsecondary student retention and success become crucial. In this article we have examined a previously under-explored area: how differences in the fit between university faculty members' expectations and their students' understanding of those expectations can result in differential student academic outcomes. This problem disproportionately affects first-generation students, whose lack of cultural capital and background information about higher education may limit their awareness of how to "do the college student role."

While we certainly acknowledge that non-academic factors, such as, social integration, level of financial support, and campus climate are also important in explaining student retention, our primary emphasis here is on those elements that affect student performance in the classroom. The conceptual model in Fig. 1 organizes these factors into two distinct, yet complementary paths, that contribute to student academic success. The lower path reflects a traditional achievement model of education, where a student's academic ability determines their understanding of course material, which then determines academic performance. On this path, the information that is essential for student success is tied to formal learning and consists of knowledge that is typically explicit and codified as part of the instructional process. The upper path of our model captures the ability to perform the student role, as represented by the ability to recognize and respond to faculty members' expectations. On this upper path, the critical information is tied to informal learning and is typically more implicit than explicit. According to this "Two Path Model," the ability to

understand the course material, as captured by the lower path, is a necessary but not sufficient source of students' performance. The mastery of the college student role—in the form of understanding the professor's expectations—is also necessary in order to demonstrate knowledge of course materials.

The upper path is where problems can arise that have nothing to do with the substantive content of a course—problems that still have negative academic consequences for students. For example, if students do not understand professors' expectations about how many hours a week they should study, then students may not allocate sufficient time to master key course skills or to identify and retain key content areas. Further, even when students do spend an appropriate amount of time learning key course-related skills and content, their grades may still suffer if they do not understand the kind of performance that the professor expects. For example, students may be confused or uncertain about the type of content that will be covered on a test or about the proper sources to use for a paper, and so on.

We, thus, agree with Eraut and associates (2000), that expertise in the form of role mastery involves a combination of both explicit and implicit knowledge. Course content related knowledge represents the explicit knowledge element that impacts student academic success. However, it is the implicit knowledge relating to "how to enact the college student role successfully" that produces systematic differences in academic success between traditional and first-generation students. This implicit aspect of role mastery matches what Polanyi (1966) described as "tacit knowledge"—a process wherein a person searches out "clues" from proximal information to make sense of a larger body of information that is otherwise not immediately accessible. Possessing tacit knowledge, in the form of role mastery, means that students from a more educated background have more of the "pattern recognition" skills required to understand the university's expectations for students and to recognize effective, role-based problem-solving strategies for meeting those expectations. Consequently, traditional students need less information to "locate" any course within the larger universe of possible courses, and this, in turn, gives them confidence that they know "what this professor wants" and "what it will take to succeed in this course."

The importance of this emphasis on role mastery and tacit knowledge is not limited to the individual or social psychological level. In particular, the upper path in our model is an important location where family-based differences in cultural capital can have an impact on academic outcomes for students from different backgrounds. We, thus, argue that it is easier for traditional students entering the university to become "role experts," due to their greater familiarity with higher education based on their family's past experiences within that institution. In contrast, first-generation students typically possess relatively lower levels of college student expertise, in that, they cannot rely on parental advice to help them identify and resolve role-based problems or to help them understand the university's expectations. They come to the university with less understanding of student roles and less capacity to build their existing knowledge into genuine expertise. Differences in both explicit knowledge about course content and implicit knowledge about the college student role can contribute to a process of "reproduction" (Bourdieu 1973), where those who come from an advantaged background maintain that advantage into the next generation.

Before placing too much faith in these results, however, it is important to note that this study does have several limitations, especially with regard to selection of the research participants and the effect of the setting. First, this study involved the use of a small, non-representative sample. While this is adequate for generating hypotheses, care should be taken in generalizing the findings of this research to a larger population. In addition, both the traditional and first-generation students in this study had already completed at least one

year at the university, and could thus be seen as the “success cases” of their respective groups. While we found clear differences between traditional and first-generation students in their discussions of time management and coursework issues, these data do not allow us to say anything about students who dropped out of the university in this study.

With regard to the research setting, Portland State University is an urban, primarily non-residential public university with a diverse student population. Hence, it may be that one or both groups of students in this study (traditional and first-generation) may share specific background characteristics not found among students at other schools. Also, specific aspects of the PSU educational experiences—such as a unique, yearlong Freshman Inquiry Program—may affect students in systematic ways that make it harder to compare their experiences to students from other schools.

Looking beyond those limitations, this research has implications for the development of theory, future research, and practice. From a theoretical point of view, these results have both micro- and macro-level implications. At the more micro-level, this research demonstrates the value of the “revitalized” version of role theory, with its emphasis on roles as resources that individuals use to achieve desired ends. In particular, we have demonstrated how a higher level of role mastery or expertise can serve as a resource that increases the odds of successful social interactions because the individual has a better chance of employing the version of the role that is most appropriate for a given situation. For the specific case of college students, this role mastery takes the form of an enhanced ability to recognize and meet their professors’ expectations (shown in the upper path in our model), regardless of their substantive mastery of the specific material in a course (the lower path in our model).

At a more macro-level, the theoretical implications of this research point to role mastery as an especially valuable component of Bourdieu’s cultural capital. From this perspective, family background provides some individuals with a higher level of role mastery, thus giving children of the dominant class a set of advantages that contribute to the reproduction of the existing social order. Note that emphasis on “role mastery,” as form of cultural capital, goes well beyond models that conceptualize cultural capital as “high culture” or “beaux arts.” In the specific case of the college student role, we propose that students who come from a more educated background will already have a greater mastery of the student role when they first arrive at college, as compared to students who are the first member of their family to attend college. Ultimately, the cumulative effect of this greater ability to recognize and respond appropriately to professors’ expectations leads to higher rates of graduation and better jobs.

With regard to the implications of the current work for future research, we already know that students from educationally advantaged backgrounds have higher retention rates than first-generation students, so the key task is to reinforce the current conclusion that a portion of this success is linked to role mastery. In particular, it is important to demonstrate that the differences that we have attributed to role mastery are not just differences in either intellectual capacity or effort. One strategy for investigating this set of issues is to develop a measure of role mastery and then to show that it captures differences between first-generation and more traditional students and that these differences predict student success and retention, beyond prior GPA and other indicators of intellectual ability or effort. We are already collecting survey data to test that hypothesis. In particular, that study investigates whether there are differences in the understanding of the professor’s expectations that are apparent during the early weeks of a course and that are predictive of the final grade in that class.

Another prediction from the current research is that the same factors that give traditional students an advantage can also help first-generation students succeed. We have argued that students from a more highly educated background not only have a better ability to understand different professors' expectations but also a better ability to adjust their own behaviors to accommodate those differences. This suggests that those first-generation students who also possess this ability should be more likely to succeed rather than drop out. This points to an overall line of research that compares more and less successful students within historically low-retention groups (such as first-generation students) in order to examine the extent to which mastery of the student role affects that success. In particular, do those who stay in school show a better ability to recognize and respond to professors' expectations in comparison to those who show persistent problems understanding professors' expectations?

From a research point of view, it would also be important to investigate the generality of these arguments by replicating this line of research at different kinds of universities. The question here is whether the degree to which students recognize and respond to faculty expectations is influenced by institutional characteristics, such as, public or private schools, urban or rural locations, average student age, the nature of the student orientation program, and so on. According to our differentiated version of role mastery, greater expertise with the student role will be valuable in all these settings, but the nature and content of the expertise could vary considerably between one setting and another.

One final research option would move beyond the current emphasis on beginning students to consider the development of other forms of expertise among more advanced students. In particular, as students select majors and move into specialized course work, they will need to become proficient in dealing with the specific "disciplinary culture" in their areas of concentration. This also points to the further transition that occurs between undergraduate and graduate work. It would thus be interesting to compare the kind of role learning that occurs at the beginning of undergraduate and graduate studies, including the role that prior "cultural capital" plays in facilitating that transition.

Turning to practical implications, this research can inform discussions about the importance and content of college orientation programs. Our findings emphasize the potential importance of creating orientation programs that are designed around the needs of first-generation students. The goal of these programs would be to impact the upper path in our conceptual model by giving students the skills to recognize and respond to professors' expectations. Thus, specialized orientation programs for students from non-traditional backgrounds could emphasize a basic understanding of the different kinds of faculty expectations they will encounter. In addition, a truly effective orientation program might need to provide resources that extend beyond the beginning of the school year. For example, coaching materials might be available through online technology, to assist first-generation students who do not grasp the extent of their problems in meeting faculty expectations until crises start occurring.

In addition, orientation programs and other strategies that emphasize role mastery as a strategy for improving first-generation student retention rates may require a two-pronged strategy of "targeting" and "tailoring." Targeting identifies those who need to receive assistance with a particular issue—in this case, the importance of understanding faculty expectations. While first-generation students are not the only ones who would benefit academically from a better understanding of faculty expectations, the current results indicate that these students are more likely to require help in this area. In contrast to targeting, tailoring consists of adjusting a message or strategy so that it more closely "fits" the group in question. In this case, orientation and coaching programs for first-generation

students need to be designed to be maximally useful for this group of students. Specific strategies might involve the creation of non-threatening environments by employing already-successful first-generation students as peer mentors for new students.

Ultimately, the underlying issue for both the theoretical and the practical implications of this research is the possibility that first-generation students suffer from a “cumulative disadvantage.” Our findings clearly imply that even among students with similar academic abilities in similar learning environments, those who come from less educationally advantaged backgrounds may not perform as well as those who come from more educated families. This suggests that role mastery, as a form of cultural capital, is an essential component in the social reproduction of the gap between educational “haves” and “have nots.” If higher education is to continue to be the prime vehicle for constructing a meritocratic society, then universities and colleges must ensure that the path to success depends on students’ academic abilities, rather than on their abilities to understand what professors expect of them.

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