AS STUDENTS who are the first in their families to go to college have gained attention in higher education, many colleges are trying to support them with programs and resources. Still, divisions between first-generation students and their peers prevail -- and even for those who become faculty members, cultural challenges remain.

Sonja M. Ardoin, through her research and her work, is tackling the issues that first-generation students face. As program director for higher-education administration and a clinical assistant professor at Boston University, Ms. Ardoin, who was a first-generation student from rural southern Louisiana, still notices the highered jargon that can trip students up.

Terms as familiar on campus as "major," "minor," "office hours," and "study abroad" can cause confusion and be isolating for first-generation students, she says. Simple changes, like explaining what those words mean or using more-universal language, can help. So can introducing students to classmates, as well as faculty and staff members, who can identify with their varied experiences.
Ms. Ardoin spoke with The Chronicle about still trying to fit into academe, and about what campuses should keep in mind to support and not stigmatize first-generation students and faculty members.

-- FERNANDA ZAMUDIO-SUARÉZ

As a first-gen student, how did you decide to go to college?
There was a lot of messaging from my family, even though nobody had been to college, that I needed to go to college to get a better life. They never exactly told me what "better" meant. I just figured it meant different than what we had in my hometown, in my family. There was a push to have good grades, because the only way I was going to go to college was if I got scholarships. There wasn't a capacity in my family to pay for college.

I applied to three schools -- back then it was all paper -- and I waited. I remember one day I picked up the mail on my way home from school. There was this letter from LSU, and I remember sitting in my pretty crappy vehicle thinking, I'm going to open this, and it's going to determine the rest of my life.

How did you end up pursuing a career in higher education?
As an undergraduate at LSU, I applied to be an orientation leader, did student government, and through that I met some administrators, particularly a woman named K.C. White, who is now vice president for student affairs at Kennesaw State, in Georgia. She said to me, "You're very involved on campus. What are you interested in?" I was already an education major. I already thought education was my career path. She let me know that I could work at a university for the rest of my life. I had never considered that. I guess I never understood who helped make universities operate.

How has your experience as a first-generation student influenced your highered career?
I think I'll always feel like a first-generation student, even though I've now been part of academia for over a decade. There are still components that seem very new to me or that I don't understand. I don't know if it ever leaves you, the feeling that the system wasn't necessarily set up for you. Historically, higher education was for white, male, Christian, affluent folks.

When I got to my Ph.D., I knew I wanted to study first-gen students. While they are getting more attention now, in literature and the press, that wasn't the case when I started college, in 2000. And still a lot of the time we use "first gen" as an umbrella term, when really it's not.
Some students face racial issues or class issues. But not all first-gen students have class issues. I'm trying to, in my research and in my work, figure out how do we tell the stories, the nuances of first-gen students in a way that shows their intersectionality. What does it mean to be a first-gen student for different populations?

**What do institutions often miss?**
They make a lot of assumptions that first gen is also working class or poor, which is not necessarily the case. There are folks, for example in my hometown, who when oil was big did well. There is more to social-class identity or first-gen identity than just whether or not you have money.

My dissertation research is on academic jargon and how we have a specific language at the university that creates in-groups and out-groups. Folks who have experience in higher education maybe understand what a major is, they understand what a minor is, they understand what the Fafsa is. For a student who is first generation, typically there's a bigger learning curve, because these are not typical words that are used in their household or in their community. When we use that jargon in our admissions material or on our websites, it sends an unintended message to a lot of first-generation students: that you aren't welcome here, because you don't understand the language we're using to promote our institution.

**What can be done?**
From a recruiting standpoint, we can look at doing county- or parish-based high-school fairs, with options in the state or neighboring states. I never thought about applying to schools out of state, even though my academic credentials would have qualified me to do that. The concept of undermatching we see a lot with first-gen students, because we aren't recruiting where they are, or their high schools don't have the resources to spend on college counseling.

Recruitment should come in multiple forms -- not just online, but hard copies in case people don't have access to technology. And we should look at recruitment materials and ask, Are we using jargon? If we are, can we explain it, or can we just extract it and use words that are more universal?

**When a first-gen student gets to a four-year institution, what are some of the cultural divides?**
There's still a jargon issue. There could be a financial issue. There's not being able to fully engage because you don't understand the system. You may not really know what office hours
are. Or it might be like, "You can apply for study-abroad scholarships," but you don't know where the scholarship office is, or you don't know what study abroad is.

These things seem natural to students whose parents or family members went to college, but first-gen students are kind of playing catch-up to feel fully like college students.

What about when they go home?
That can create some tension. They may be learning a new language, new belief systems, new perspectives that differ from the way of life or the way of thinking that they came from. There's a lot of literature around how students feel. I can speak for myself that I fit in neither place. People at home think I'm "too good" now in some capacities, and in academia I will always feel like I don't quite fit, either.

How can colleges support first-generation students without stigmatizing them?
That is a very challenging line to draw. In some ways, offering particular resources can label students. I think it's a matter of offering opportunities that students can self-select into. For example, Brown University just opened the first center for first-gen and low-income students, and it's creating a physical space for those students on the campus. There was recently a conference for first-gen students at Ivy League institutions. The University of Wisconsin at Madison has a first-gen-student association. The University of Kentucky and others are doing first-gen living/learning communities. Some institutions offer their students the chance to come early, in the summer, to help with that acclimation and socialization process, to help them prepare for their first semester.

Meeting other first-gen students, so they don't feel like they're the only one, can be very helpful. What they do at Boston University is connect first-gen students to other first-gen students, administrators, and faculty who have had this experience, too. People at all levels of the institution can potentially identify with their situation.

What issues come up for first-generation faculty?
Part of it is that the system is always going to feel different and new, like we're still learning it. The whole process of reappointment and tenure and publication is still new for me. Learning how all that works can be a challenge.

From the social-class angle, Alfred Lubrano has a book called Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams (Wiley, 2005) that talks about the concept of class straddling. Even though now my income may say that I am middle or upper-middle class, I don't always
operate and feel that way. A lot of people focus on the financial capital, when really it's
cultural capital, social capital, linguistic capital, and navigational capital, which is out of Tara
Yosso's work on community cultural wealth. There are still some things from my working-
class background that don’t always align with academia’s middle-class expectations.

**Like what?**
Types of language -- accents still have a stigma. Particularly a Southern accent has some
connotations. A colleague and I always talk about being at a fancy events where you have to
use specific silverware. I hate to going to white-tablecloth restaurants. They make me very
uncomfortable. Certain types of food you’re expected to eat. I would much rather have a beer
in a koozie, but an academic event is more based on, What kind of wine are you drinking?
That's not at all what I grew up with or what I enjoy.

**You've started a group for first-generation faculty.**
It's out of the Naspa organization, for student-affairs administrators. My colleagues Becky
Martinez, Tori Svoboda, and I did a session at a national conference around the concept of
class straddling, and there was a response that we want to involve more people. We
approached the national organization and said, Hey, what if we did a group that focused
specifically on folks who now work in academia? Some of those people identify as first gen,
but the common link is having a poor or working-class background. We're still in the growing
stages, but we've had quite a bit of interest from folks who want to explore what it means for,
our hiring practices, for our definitions of professionalism, and just in general for the
experience.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.
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