

MAJOR ASSIGNMENT #3: ADAPT A MODULE

Classism In Higher Education By Sarah Ryan

UNIT QUESTION: Why do low-income students struggle to navigate college?

Why poor students drop out even when financial aid covers the cost [X] | PBS NewsHour

This news piece explores the many reasons a low-income student may drop out of college. One student interviewed expresses that it's difficult to find a sense of belonging, feeling distant from and inferior to his wealthier peers. Other students share concerns about what's going on in their homes, with a desire to contribute financially. Even still, other students explain that their families do not understand what being in college is like and cannot provide practical support for them.

PBS NewsHour. (2015, August 17). *Why poor students drop out even when financial aid covers the cost*. [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Sst2RPsQM8>.

All Things First-Gen TikTok Series [X] [X] [X] | Jess Ilayalith [@ilayalith-jess]

In the first video, "How I became a first-gen, low-income college student," Jess Ilayalith explains that she didn't use either label to describe herself until she got to high school. She only realized that she was low-income after spending time with much wealthier peers. Similarly, she hadn't heard the term first-generation until she was about to enter college but quickly learned that it described her.

In "What do you identify as?" she explains the difference between a "privileged poor" student and a "doubly disadvantaged student," two terms coined by Dr. Anthony Jack. She says that privileged poor students had access to enrichment programs and other resources that supported their educational journeys. In contrast, doubly disadvantaged students typically attended underfunded public schools in their own neighborhoods, which can make it more difficult to adjust to college.

Finally, "Do not be afraid to ask for what you need!" is where Jess stresses the importance of accessing resources as a low-income student. She says that these things are allocated for students in need, are there to support them, and could potentially disappear if they are not being utilized. Here, she emphasizes the need to acknowledge where you could use some help rather than forcing yourself to suffer through difficult moments.

Ilayalith, J. [@ilayalith-jess]. (2022, February 23). *Do not be afraid to ask for what you need!* [Video]. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@ilayalith_jess/video/7067993134461914414

Ilayalith, J. [@ilayalith-jess]. (2022, March 1). *How I became a first-gen, low-income college student* [Video]. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@ilayalith_jess/video/7070129827105344811?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

Ilayalith, J. [@ilayalith-jess]. (2022, April 12). *What do you identify as?* [Video]. TikTok. https://www.tiktok.com/@ilayalith_jess/video/7085714483255119150?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1

Living as a low-income student [X] | Study Break Podcast | Melody Dao

In this podcast episode, Melody Dao interviews her friends Cassidy and Karis about what it's like to be a low-income student at their respective colleges. They both share that there's a feeling of "constantly

being behind” and “never being able to catch up” to their wealthier peers in terms of resources and experience. After having the last two texts as a foundation, this podcast should give more students a more robust understanding of what being a low-income student can look like in practice. That said, there is diversity within groups of low-income students and every university is different, so these anecdotes shouldn’t be taken as universal truth.

Dao, M. (Host). (2021, June). *Living as a low-income student* (Season 2, Episode 20) [Audio podcast episode]. In *Study Break*. Spotify. <https://spotify.com/episode/3w9t1psKMjWPmtoSCUk6GM?si=76813f4465704d02>

Lessons from a first-gen Latinx student [X] | Inside Higher Ed | Alicia Reyes-Barriénte

In this article, Alicia Reyes-Barriénte reflects on how her identity as a Mexican immigrant reframed the college transition and resurfaced painful memories. Additionally, she discusses the prevalence of racist incidents at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), and the pressure to code-switch to assimilate with her white peers. Despite the barriers she faced, Reyes-Barriénte also affirms that she was able to succeed, saying: “I graduated magna cum laude with a double major and a GPA of 3.93 and was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa.”

Reyes-Barriénte, A.M. (2019, December 20). *Lessons from a first-gen, working-class, Latinx student*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/12/20/what-first-generation-working-class-latinx-student-wishes-shed-known-she-went>

Why support services for low-income students matter [X] | The Century Foundation

In this article, Isabel Banda focuses specifically on the TRIO Student Support Services Program (SSSP). This program matches first-generation, low-income students with advisors and peer mentors from the moment they begin college. Having these points of contact can help instill a sense of belonging, but can also provide practical support, like helping students track down additional financial aid or assisting with applications for jobs and graduate school.

Banda, Isabel. (2021, July 27). Why support services for first-generation, low-income students matter. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/support-services-first-generation-low-income-students-matter/>

How to help first-generation students succeed [X] | The Atlantic | Mikhail Zinshteyn

This article shares compelling statistics about student graduation rates, measures of success, and other factors that give insight into classist barriers. Additionally, it provides suggestions for how to support low-income, first-generation students in higher education. Zinshteyn discusses mentoring programs, academic support, and cultural shifts as important aspects of addressing classism in this space.

Zinshteyn, M. (2016, March 13). *How to help first-generation students succeed*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/03/how-to-help-first-generation-students-succeed/473502/>

ADAPT A MODULE: CLASSISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Of students who are both low-income and first-generation, nearly 90% will not graduate from college within six years, let alone a traditional four-year track. (Zinshteyn, 2016) Classism in higher education takes a variety of forms, but this compelling statistic dives into the crux of the issue. In the admissions process alone, low-income students face undue challenges in their efforts to attend college. Once they've arrived, students continue to be denied the proper resources and support they need to thrive. It is critical to engage issues of classism in the sphere of higher education to affirm the dignity and right of low-income students to learn.

It is important to consider that being a low-income student, for many, is only one of their multiple intersecting targeted identities. First-generation students, whose parents did not attend a four-year college, are commonly a racially and ethnically diverse subgroup of students, who often happen to additionally be low-income. (Pappano, 2015) In this text set, students are invited to learn about not only the challenges of socioeconomic status in college but also of first-generation students of color. While financial circumstances are the primary focus, these identities are inextricably linked for many, and students deserve to learn about what this can look like, especially if college is in their future. For low-income high schoolers, this unit may provide useful insights to guide them in their own lives, and similarly, it can educate their wealthier peers about how to provide better support and allyship as they approach the college setting.

COMPELLING QUESTIONS

“Why do low-income students struggle to navigate college?” This unit question asks students to consider how classism in higher education can create barriers for low-income students. It is open-ended in nature, with multiple avenues for answering the question. Students may cite a lack of college readiness in underfunded high school settings, the burden of working extra jobs while in school to support one's family, microaggressions from wealthier peers that reinforce the feeling of unbelonging,

and so much more. This question invites students to analyze the myriad factors at play, and understand how these compounding challenges put low-income students at risk.

I originally thought that framing the question around an inability to succeed in college, or students' propensity to drop out, might be more likely to get under people's skin. While this may be true, and having a compelling question is valuable, I think doing so presents the issue in an inaccurate and potentially damaging way. Low-income students undoubtedly have more impeding their success than their wealthier peers, but that does not mean that they do not succeed. Some students may not graduate on time, and some may not graduate at all, but others can thrive as high-achieving members of their undergraduate classes. (Reyes-Barriénte, 2019) I hope that framing this as a struggle, rather than an inability, will invite students to answer the question comprehensively. There are a variety of outcomes, and students should evaluate what support, advantages, and individual differences make each reality possible.

PATHWAY THROUGH THE TEXT SET

This text set begins with a PBS NewsHour video entitled, "Why poor students drop out even when financial aid covers the cost." Starting here helps introduce students to the issue of classism in higher education, providing an overview of the myriad reasons a student may not finish their degree within four years. Through interviews with low-income students on multiple college campuses, the reporter explores students' perceived lack of belonging, concerns about their families at home, and general feelings of unpreparedness to explore college life. It is important to acknowledge that these are not the only issues students face, but this video still provides a helpful introduction to the topic.

With the news source as a strong foundation, students can dive into Jess Ilayalith's TikToks for more insight into the low-income student identity. They should begin with "How I became a first-gen, low-income college student," followed by "What do you identify as?" and end with "Do not be afraid to ask for what you need!" These videos allow for more context as to how low-income students may

identify themselves. For example, in the second video, Jess explains the difference between a “privileged poor” student and a “doubly disadvantaged student,” two terms coined by Dr. Anthony Jack. She notes that she considers herself to be privileged poor because she attended a private high school in an affluent community, whereas doubly disadvantaged students typically go to underfunded public schools in their own neighborhoods. These descriptors should help students conceptualize the diversity of low-income student experiences in a way that was not addressed in the PBS NewsHour video.

In the following video, Jess talks about the resources available to low-income students on campus, and how many will not take advantage of them out of fear that someone else has a greater need. Here, she explains that if all students approach this matter in the same way, then no one gets adequate resources, and administrators have less incentive to provide them in general. She advises students to accept the help their institutions are willing to offer them, if for nothing else then to keep systems of support in place for the broader community.

After digesting Jess Ilayalith’s perspective on this matter, students can move on to a more discussion-based approach on the Study Break Podcast. In the assigned episode, Melody, Cassidy, and Karis discuss their day-to-day lives as low-income students at their respective colleges. This podcast is meant to provide students with a more robust understanding of what low-income students endure. Karis details feelings of imposter syndrome around her wealthier peers, and Cassidy expresses similar anxieties around her mom losing her job, knowing both that that will cause practical problems and that her classmates may not understand. As Dr. Anthony Jack writes in the *New York Times*, “Admission alone, as it turns out, is not the great equalizer. Just walking through the campus gates unavoidably heightens these students’ awareness and experience of the deep inequalities around them.” (Jack, 2019) Part of understanding what low-income students face is hearing about the loneliness and isolation that they can endure. Karis and Cassidy’s anecdotes cannot be taken as universal truth, as every student’s experience is unique, but they are useful in broadening one’s conceptualization of this issue.

Alicia Reyes-Barriéntez’s article, “Lessons from a first-gen, working-class, Latinx student,” continues to deepen this understanding and introduces a more intersectional lens to consider. By reflecting on the college transition as a traumatic experience, reminding her of immigrating to the United States, and discussing the prevalence of racist incidents at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), the image of what low-income students experience becomes more complex. Considering the overlap that exists between students of color and low-income students, it is critical to share the perspectives of students of color. Here, students may notice both how her story parallels and diverges from that of other low-income students. Many of the challenges faced are the same, but BIPOC students must navigate the reality of having multiple targeted identities.

After diving into the difficulties of being a low-income student, “Why support services for low-income students matter” invites readers to learn about some of the available resources. In particular, Isabel Banda focuses specifically on the TRIO Student Support Services Program (SSSP). This program matches first-generation, low-income students with advisors and peer mentors from the moment they begin college. Programs like this one are a clear response to low-income students voicing concerns about feeling isolated, lost, and unable to keep up with their peers. It is a prime example of the power of listening to those in need of support rather than speaking over them. In the context of this text set, understanding the support that TRIO SSSP provides instills a sense of hope and encouragement that the problems students face are not unsolvable, and some organizations and individuals are willing to help tackle them. Resources like this are not always visible to the students who need them, but when they are, they can make all the difference.

With that in mind, the last text selected for this unit explains other supports that can be made available to low-income students. In the article, “How to help first-generation students succeed,” Mikhail Zinshteyn discusses the changes that can make a substantial difference. He encourages the development of mentorship programs on campus, cites a need for more targeted academic support, and

ultimately argues that cultural shifts will be critical. If students do not feel welcome in their own learning environment, then no amount of financial aid or academic resources will be able to help them thrive.

With this article, we end the text set on a call to action. We should not be considering injustices to lean into despair, but stand in solidarity with others and seek to build a better society.

CONCLUSION

In her discussion post for Module 3A, Caroline Lay likens the experience of wealthy college students to that of a straight-white male using John Scalzi's video game metaphor. She writes, "People on the easiest difficulty settings don't see college as an option, but rather as an expectation... students on higher difficulty settings, such as first-gen students, see college as one of the highest achievements, though they do not have the background to understand how the college system works in order to succeed off the bat." (Lay, 2022) As a first-generation low-income student myself, this reality is one of the reasons I chose to focus my past two assignments on classism in higher education. Neither of my parents, nor my older brother, attended college, and to some degree, my admission to Boston College was seen as a crowning achievement for my family. That said, getting into college (with enough financial aid to make it feasible) was treated as the end of the line growing up. For me, and many students, not having the capacity to look further into what college might look like can create a lot of challenges.

My hope is that this text set will stir deeper reflection and students of all economic backgrounds. As I learned from my small group's discussion of the game *Spent*, it is sometimes not until we are asked to truly put ourselves in the shoes of one another that we realize what their experiences can look like. Students will likely approach this text set with a general understanding of wealth as an advantage, but they may not understand how that privilege (or lack thereof) can shape the experience of higher education. Through the reading for this unit, I aim for students to develop a more robust understanding of the lived experiences of a low-income student.

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