

“People Like Us”: Theorizing First-Generation College as a Marker of Difference

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In a cultural moment marked by concerns about income inequality, economic mobility, and the need for a highly literate workforce, universities are framed in public discourse as essential to social mobility. As such, instructors in composition may observe greater numbers of first-generation college students in our classes (representing at least 30% of undergraduate enrollments nationally, with local variations based on institution, geography, and sticker price¹). And although critics of expanded college access perpetuate crisis rhetoric critiqued by scholars such as Tom Fox and Catherine Prendergast, national media regularly laud the achievements of first-generation college students during each graduation and college acceptance season.

Positioned at this tension of access and exclusivity, first-generation college (FGC) students experience challenges that distinguish them from continuing-generation peers. As the first in their families to graduate college, these students may lack networks or social capital that help navigate campus bureaucracies. These students also more likely experience academic challenges as a result of attending under-funded schools and taking fewer college preparation courses, and when they get to college, FGC students are more likely to depart without a degree (Redford and Hoyer 4).

While “first-generation college” as a descriptor gains salience among higher education commentariat, composition studies as a field has not yet theorized the term to the extent of other identity markers such as race and class. As a marker of difference, a way of characterizing an individual’s positioning relative to social margins and centers, “first-generation college” has often been used in composition demographically, to identify student need or profile research participants, or as a way of denoting multiple intersecting and overlapping positionalities that shape student behavior, needs, or literacies. The term itself, however, may be under-theorized in relation to other material, cultural, or personal identifiers that influence student literacies. To address this gap, this article focuses on the relationship between FGC as a marker of difference emerging from interactions with college representatives and students’ own accounts of class on campus.

By focusing on the relationship between FGC as a marker assigned to a student and their own accounts of lived experience of difference on campus, this article contributes to ongoing conversations in composition about the conditions of students’ marginalization and the influence of those conditions on how students see themselves (or are positioned by others) as literate subjects.

With the perennial return to class in the neoliberal moment, we also see a proliferation of class frameworks in composition studies. From taxonomies of class by James Thomas Zebroski and James Rushing Daniel to recent collections such as Genesee M. Carter and William H. Thelin's *Class in the Composition Classroom*, scholars continue to nuance our understanding of students' classed positionality. For example, Edie-Marie Roper and Mike Edwards's contribution to Carter and Thelin's collection argues that traditional working-class identifiers lack resonance with many students because these terms do not reflect today's economic realities. Rather, they argue that composition studies ought to embrace TRIO identifiers such as "low-income" and "first-generation college" to bring instructors' vocabulary in line with students' own identification practices. They write, "If class demands definitional investigation, one component of that investigation should be to examine how instructors talk about class in ways that are different from how students talk about class . . ." (105).

Although Roper and Edwards do not frame their work in these terms, the tension between markers of difference favored by students and those used by instructors may be read as a tension between self-constitution by students and the rhetorical force of others' constitutive rhetoric surrounding terms like "working-class," "first-generation college," and "low-income." This tension may be exacerbated by the history of the use of "first-generation college" and its function in determining eligibility for aid and scholarships. The term was developed by federal programs in the 1970s and 1980s "to identify non-financial obstacles to post-secondary education" (Auclair et al. 3). As the term has proliferated, definitions have also fluctuated: some organizations use FGC to denote parents without *any* college experience while others limit the term to students whose parents did not attain a four-year degree. Although first-generation students by either definition demonstrate lower educational outcomes (Smith), the inconsistent application of the term by researchers and administrators complicates efforts to theorize FGC as a marker of difference. Given these complications, we benefit from placing the term in the context of students' own rhetorics of difference, the practices and perspectives through which they navigate the conditions of their marginalization on campus.

As a marker with potential for organizing students for self-advocacy but which originates and primarily circulates within higher education administration, "first-generation college" warrants particular attention from scholars interested in the intersection between literacy and rhetoric, including what Ben Wetherbee identifies as the "complex, recursive relationship between . . . inwardly and outwardly directed discourses" that accompany self-constitution through literacy (107). Observing the significance of self-constitution in Jacqueline Royster's *Traces of a Stream*, he argues for literacy and rhetoric's shared interest in the ways "identity and competence form through literate practice" (107). With this, he identifies parallel inquiry in rhetorical theory, including in the work of Maurice Charland, who argues, as Wetherbee paraphrases, that "rhetorical texts not only persuade but first *constitute*, or hail, an audience and name its identity" (108). My article extends Wetherbee's argument for the value of self-constitution to understand literate identity, or who we imagine ourselves to be through and in relation to texts, to an investigation of how the FGC marker functions constitutively, including how students see themselves as FGC (or as low income, or not) or how they situate that identifier within a broader understanding of the conditions of their marginalization on campus.

Whereas Wetherbee's article invites us to observe processes of self-constitution, Kate Vieira's analysis of "the social consequences of literacy" for undocumented workers in the US highlights that literacy, for her research participants, is less a matter of identity than identification. In other words, Vieira's analysis demonstrates that literacy status may authorize, legitimize, or contain subjects through the practice of other-constitution, a way of marking and positioning individuals within social narratives of valuation and power. For Vieira's research participants—undocumented workers—the regulatory function of "papers" is apparent not only in labor laws but also in national debates about who "belongs" in the US. While the stakes and contexts are very different for undocumented workers and FGC students, we might extend Vieira's interest in bureaucratic constitution to reframe the conversation away from literate identities and instead toward *literate positionality*, an exploration of the ways that literate status intersects with or amplifies wider conditions of marginalization to authorize, regulate, or enable rhetorical practice.

In this article, I argue that while traditional frameworks for the study of classed phenomena continue to demonstrate explanatory power, the bureaucratic and rhetorical nature of "first-generation college" as a marker necessitates a constitutive rhetorical approach to the term, an investigation of how the use of the term articulates a positionality, situates it within local and cultural narratives, and assigns it value. As a marker of literate positionality, FGC mediates relationships between institutional literacy sponsors and individuals whose material and cultural circumstances situate them at the margins of that institution. In other words, whereas we might trace literate identity to the relationship between self and community, when thinking about literate positionality, we must examine the relationship between individuals and authorizing discourses, whether institutional and bureaucratic or social. Framing "first-generation college" in these terms, specifically linking literate standing, institutional practices, and rhetorical possibilities, helps differentiate from the social, cultural, or other markers of difference with which "first-generation college" status may intersect.

Because the FGC marker also operates within and alongside traditional markers of difference, to better understand how students are positioned by local and cultural narratives and how they adapt to or resist this positioning, in this article I investigate how students have been hailed or constituted into literate positionalities that shape their encounters with campus representatives and peers. Toward this end, I first consider how the demographic and institutional functions of the FGC marker trouble attempts to theorize this term in composition studies. I then consider a case study in FGC identification, exploring the affordances of viewing this practice through a constitutive rhetorical framework. Recognizing that class relations themselves may be understood in part as an effect of self- and other-constitution in literate contexts, this article shifts from case study analysis to an overview of a range of FGC student accounts of class on campus. These research participants' rhetorics of difference parallel class theory in composition, locating the influence of class prior to or outside an encounter, across rhetorical environments as an indelible influence on individuals, or within a rhetorical encounter, erased or amplified by student performance. Ultimately, the ways that students locate the constitutive influence of class may shape our understanding of FGC literate positionality as we observe how students respond to or make sense of their experiences of marginalization on campus.

Research Methods

The analysis in this article draws on interviews with seventeen FGC students and alumni. This interview data derives from an IRB-approved study about first-generation college student experiences and rhetorics of difference that investigated the functions of identification and belonging in on-campus programming at a single large, midwestern state university, including a college preparation and bridge program, orientation event programming, and scholarship residence halls for low-income high-achievers. Each research participant took part in one semi-structured thirty- to sixty-minute face-to-face or phone interview or focus group, conducted between January and May 2014. Interviews included questions about participants' experiences as underrepresented and/or first-generation college students and the support they received from the university, their peers, and their families. Because research participants were solicited on campus and through an alumni listserv, graduation dates ranged from the late 1960s to the 2010s. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms. I analyzed these interviews using inductive coding methods guided by grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin; Charmaz; Saldaña), which entails simultaneous data collection and analysis in order to allow analytical frameworks to emerge from the close observation of data.

In terms of limitations of this study, students and alumni participating in this research represent a significant range of experiences across time, including macroeconomic shifts in the region, the university's transformation from open to selective admissions, and attempts by the institution to recruit and retain a greater number of diverse students. Attempts to generalize across their lived experiences of class and their identification as FGC (or indifference to this identification) necessarily risk essentializing in ways that may reify structures or conditions of marginalization (e.g., conflating high-achieving FGC and at-risk FGC, obscuring the significance of participants' racial identities). My analysis in this article also benefits from the demographic and cultural overlap between social class and FGC status, but this overlap may also elide significant markers of difference (and composition theories) relevant to FGC status, including ethnic and racial difference, home language and multilingual learner status, immigration status, and disability. Additionally, while research participants for this project may share many characteristics with other FGC students, these students' experiences may not be representative of FGC experiences for "non-traditional," commuter, or community-college students. Although all research participants identified as first-generation college students, the salience of this term varied widely based on participants' enrollment dates, affiliation with cohort-building FGC campus programming, and their other identity markers.

First-Generation College As A Marker Of Difference

Before taking up a case study in FGC identification, I want to consider characteristics of the FGC marker that distinguish it from other identity markers. As I note above, the historical origin of the term and its inconsistent application complicate efforts to theorize FGC in composition. At the same time, lower academic outcomes for these students have necessitated institutional interventions in a range of contexts. In a literature review for the National Center for Education Statistics, Jeremy

Redford and Kathleen Mulvaney Hoyer, citing Lauff and Ingels, note that among a representative sample of 2002 high school sophomores, only "17 percent of students who had parents with no postsecondary experience" graduated with at least a Bachelor's degree by 2012 (1). Lee Ward and colleagues observe that FGC students across demographics are more likely to "arrive at college campuses at risk academically" and that these students "have lower educational aspirations than other college-bound students" (17). While academic outcomes for FGC students invite institutional responses, FGC enrollments have also grown "anywhere from 22 percent to 47 percent," depending on which definition researchers employ (Ward et al. 10). In response to these patterns, institutions that recruit or enroll large numbers of FGC students (and many seeking to diversify their enrollments) have developed a range of responses targeting FGC literate positionality. These programs are largely organized around academic preparation and college counseling, promoting literacy sponsorship and social capital through mentoring, addressing students' needs for community and affective support or "belonging," and offering material and scholarship support (see Ward et al. for an overview of ten different institutional responses to first-generation college enrollments).² For many individuals affiliated with these programs, their status as FGC becomes a primary means of identifying with and navigating campus environments.

While FGC students' academic challenges and campus programming for FGC students may suggest or promote a cohesive FGC identification, diverse racial demographics complicate efforts to theorize FGC as literate identity or category of experience. For example, Victor Saenz and colleagues report that while students of color are more likely to be FGC students, white (non-Hispanic) students "represent a large majority of all entering first-generation college students due to their numerical majority within the entering college student population" (11). However, Robert Toutkoushian, lead researcher on a 2015 paper, is quoted in *Inside Higher Education* claiming that "[t]he fastest growing demographic is Hispanics and Latinos and they tend to have lower educational levels than non-Hispanics and non-Latinos," so we may anticipate further demographic changes among the FGC population (Smith). Given the diversity of FGC students, as we in composition begin to more fully theorize FGC identification, we should be cognizant of rhetoric that positions FGC metonymically, as in the case of rhetoric that conflates "working class" and "white working class" positionality. Rather, we should embrace a framework that seeks to understand FGC positionality as intersectional and as situated within local and institutional conditions.

Additionally, financial and educational barriers to entry may distort enrollments by faster-growing demographic groups, demonstrating the need to view FGC as a bureaucratic as well as cultural marker. In this vein, Saenz *et al.* observe that the rate of enrollment of African American FGC students has decreased faster than the number of African Americans earning a college degree, suggesting that "it is very probable that first-generation African American students are having more difficulty gaining access to four-year institutions, a supposition which can also be made for Hispanic first-generation students" (12). This situation is further complicated by these students' own application and enrollment behaviors. As Caroline Hoxby and Christopher Avery observe, FGC students are more likely to enroll at less selective institutions closer to home, even when academic performance would get them into more selective institutions (2). In other words, the racial composition of first-

generation college students in our own classes not only reflects demographic trends but also the admissions policies and recruitment efforts of our institutions.

In this respect, theorizing the FGC marker in composition entails understanding not only national and regional enrollment patterns but also how our own institutions identify, recruit, and otherwise support individuals *as FGC students*. Within my own research sample, for example, two significant initiatives shape participants' sense of their literate positionality on campus. Research participants who were residents of cooperative scholarship dorms benefitted from academic and student-life programming that promoted group cohesion and retention among residents. Many other research participants were active in a pre-college prep program that targeted urban and African American students and which emerged from affirmative action assessments and recruitment efforts of the 1980s. While both initiatives served FGC populations, rhetorics emerging from their distinct missions promoted different conversations about race and belonging on campus. As such, while participants' understanding of difference on campus was shaped by their affiliation with campus programs, their perspectives on FGC experience varied based on their programs' focuses.

In this way, the FGC marker also operates within institutional, cultural, and political narratives concerning difference and access in higher education. For example, while she does not address FGC identification specifically, Stephanie L. Kerschbaum argues that "By using neoliberal discourses to assign value to diversity and by obscuring the local and contextualized nature of many intergroup and cross-cultural interactions, such diversity discourses make it difficult to identify or alter systemic practices that legitimate oppression and disenfranchisement" (39). Similarly, Jennifer Clary-Lemon challenges reliance on terms such as "difference" or "diverse" as a trope in her analysis of racial ideologies of composition. Given the substantial overlap between FGC student populations and the racial groups Clary-Lemon advocates for, her critique of the pattern of decentering race (and centering the systems of marginalization) (W8) represents a compelling critique of the increasing reliance on "first-generation college" identification. The same "lack of theoretical clarity" in talking about race in composition haunts the FGC marker of difference, which as an umbrella term both describes and obscures intersectional marginalization. For example, specifically racialized experiences of difference on campus (e.g., being the only person in class who "looks like you") may become transposed onto a general FGC experience. The effect of this is to euphemize and individualize institutional racism while obscuring the racialized campus experience or conflating class and race experiences.

FGC Identification As Rhetorical Resource

As this review of the definitions, demographics, and implications of FGC enrollments suggests, the FGC marker may resist framing that privileges "literate identity." This marker serves institutional functions, predicting and mitigating student need, while also offering academically "at risk" students a lens through which they can view the conditions of their marginalization. Moreover, as an inclusive marker of difference, FGC may serve as a rhetorical resource for institutions engaging with historically marginalized populations.

The same qualities that might displace other markers of difference also create potential for

organizing among students who might be marginalized by the “traditional” college experience. In some instances, the FGC marker itself becomes a tool for promoting belonging by encouraging students to make connections with other historically marginalized groups. This organizing potential has gained attention in national media such as *The New York Times* (Pappano) and nationally distributed reports from Michigan Public Radio (Guerra). Likewise, campus programs celebrating FGC identification promote affective connections among students and identification across

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institutions. In other words, as a marker mediating relationships with institutional literacy sponsors, “first-generation college” situates these individuals within narratives of value (e.g., promoting “diversity” on campus)

and identification and identity (e.g., “We are first!” or “FGC Unite!”) while also extending the conditions of “belonging” on campus.

Although FGC solidarity campaigns draw on social movement rhetorics, the FGC marker lacks salience among non-college student populations and among many students on campus. This issue figures significantly into the success of interventions premised on community, affective support, and belonging. In his research on FGC salience, Mark P. Orbe argues:

First, the saliency of FGC student status in the overall construction of identity varied greatly [among research participants]. The centrality of FGC student identity was largely influenced by situational context (home versus school) and type of campus (selective, public, community college, or university). Second[,] FGC student status appeared to be more salient when it intersected with other aspects of a person’s co-cultural identity, especially those based on race/ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, and gender. . . . Third, and finally, FGC students appear to lack any sense of community with other groups of FGC students. (144)

Orbe’s work provides a valuable scaffold for our understanding of literate identities of FGC students, but ultimately, Orbe argues, “Unlike most aspects of cultural identity . . . FGC student status does not exist within the context of a larger community with which individuals can identify” (145). This insight qualifies Roper and Edwards’s call for a shift from explicit class identifiers to first-generation college. In order for FGC identification to gain traction as a meaningful resource for mobilizing class conscious or marginalized student efforts, the identifier needs a push for salience as well as a sense of community to buoy that effort.

While many research participants demonstrated patterns of identification with FGC status consistent with Orbe’s observations, one participant in particular demonstrates the potential for FGC identification as a rhetorical resource in encounters with institutional literacy sponsors. Da’vante Rawlings, an African-American student, participated in a program for low-income, minority, and FGC students that focused on equipping participants with academic and affective strategies for succeeding in college. Through this program, he made connections with other FGC students as well

as university staff and faculty. Based on these experiences, Rawlings leveraged his FGC identification as a resource to bridge difference with institutional representatives and other students. From his perspective, FGC students face not only academic challenges but also challenges balancing family commitments and affective experiences of leaving home for college. In his framing of these issues, Rawlings posits that institutional representatives' responsiveness depends on their own positionality:

My problem, was that as a senior, I had a brother who just got arrested. [. . .] So I'm having to, being the oldest of seven, having to step up and take on all these responsibilities that may not be [common]—and that's not saying that someone outside of the first-generation class can't talk about that [. . .] I'm sure they can find people. But sometimes those people aren't readily available to sit down and be like, "Oh, you're a first-generation college student too? Let's sit down. (Rawlings)

Importantly, in this account FGC status serves as a primary means by which Rawlings advocates for himself and others. The elision with the language of social class, his framing of the issue in terms of "the first-generation class," projects a coherent FGC experience that seems dependent on metaphoric identification, a sense that institutional representatives must be "like" the populations they serve. He elaborates that shared FGC status helps institutional representatives see that his experience is not the same as the "typical" student's:

I'm trying to do well [. . .] But I have problems. And not just me but other students. We all have problems [. . .] that are unique, that some people may just never had to deal with. [. . .] Problems that you don't really consider sometimes, I feel like, depending on what background you came from. (Rawlings)

This statement reiterates for Rawlings the significance of one's positionality in not only authorizing particular kinds of literacy sponsorship ("find[ing] people" who can "talk about" FGC experience) but also in making FGC marginalization intelligible to institutional representatives. With this in mind, the problem of FGC salience not only affects how students themselves identify on campus but also whether and to what extent college advocates and literacy sponsors are able to tailor their advice to specific student needs.

While these initial statements of FGC need seem to advance a fixed and coherent notion of FGC identification, further statements by Rawlings nuance this framing and foreground the constitutive element contained of this student's rhetoric of difference. Specifically, he advances "perspective" as a way to describe the effect of being constituted as FGC in conversation with institutional representatives and college advocates. "Perspective" acknowledges the constraining influence of material difference in social interactions while also recognizing the transformative aspects of college experience. The first time that Rawlings brings up the notion of perspective in our interview, the term is embedded in a discussion of how college "will grow you and groom you." He describes meetings with program literacy sponsors: "So when you can sit down and have those conversations, [. . .] it really changes your perspective; it changes how you view college. You know, again, meeting people who were first-generation like us, having conversations with them about the difficulty, [. . .] the feelings of isolation" (Rawlings). In this account, shared FGC identification fosters trust and positions the institutional representative as an advocate, as someone who understands his problems.

Rawlings's use of "perspective" resonates with theories of literacy sponsorship, calling attention to the specifically constitutive element in these relationships. Moreover, his acknowledgement of personal transformation through relationships with sponsors (who "grow you and groom you") similarly highlights the interplay between self-constitution and other-constitution. Rawlings's "perspective" also suggests awareness and navigation of positionality that is rooted not in stable or fixed markers—not strictly a function of his socio-economic standing or racial background—but rather in sustained and continued relationships with institutional representatives who change his view of what college means, who challenge alienating narratives and who situate him within narratives of possibility.

In Rawlings's use of the term, FGC as literate positionality not only functions demographically, to explain why some students struggle, but also serves as a rhetorical resource, as a means of building solidarity. In addition to the examples above, where institutional representatives "find someone" who shares Rawlings's "perspective," he also describes an FGC evangelism that extends to activities on campus. For example,

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the FGC student organization he leads aims for visibility on campus, "so that that perspective that we have—our lifestyle—can be shared throughout the campus and the world" (Rawlings). By suggesting that the resistance that FGC students face on campus stems from others' lack of familiarity with their experience, he appears to posit a form of consciousness-building across difference as a response to deterministic forces of class and race. Viewing the FGC marker as constitutive helps us understand how Rawlings leverages this identification to bridge cultural differences among staff and students.

Rawlings's account demonstrates how one student leverages the FGC identifier in negotiation with campus officials and representatives. By connecting Rawlings with FGC staff, the institution employs the identifier constitutively but inclusively—not merely marking Rawlings as marginalized but showing through personal connection what it means or looks like to be FGC. Not only, then, does this practice serve to position him as a viable subject on campus, to counter narratives of who "belongs" on campus, but it also prepares Rawlings to advocate for himself and others by promoting his "perspective."

While Rawlings's account highlights the rhetorical possibility of FGC identification, his case is also exceptional. As such, our understanding of the FGC marker would benefit from a broader range of student voices. However, many research participants articulated rhetorics of difference not explicitly tied to the FGC identifier. In light of this discrepancy, the following sections contextualize FGC literate positionality by examining how research participants characterize their lived experience of difference on campus, including how these accounts locate the constitutive function of class phenomena prior to, across, or within rhetorical encounters. If the FGC marker's significance to institutions concerns its value in identifying "at risk" students and, as Rawlings shows, providing language for making sense of marginalization on campus, then attention to students' own accounts

of difference helps us understand how FGC literate positionality is also situated within broader landscapes of class on campus.

Locating Difference Prior To The Rhetorical Encounter

Many research participants articulate experiences that identify class phenomena as bounded, fixed, and determined prior to rhetorical encounters with others. Because these accounts focus on class awareness as an effect of geography or culture or as an effect of moving from more homogeneous to more diverse environments, their rhetorics of difference rely on mobility, adaptation, or assimilation. These assumptions situate FGC literate positionality within cultural narratives of personal and economic transformation and necessitate interventions premised on adaptation to norms of (middle class) college culture. However, as a review of class-conscious composition scholarship suggests, these strategies may also represent a burden on historically marginalized students.

Informants' accounts of the geography of class difference illustrate how place itself serves as a class marker. For example, a white scholarship dorm alum describes attending a private Catholic high school on scholarship. He notes that because many of the activities were organized according to which parish a student attended, that student's class status was readily apparent (Price). One African American student describes how even identifying her hometown or neighborhood marks her as poor (Lamb). The emphasis on the geography of class among these informants is unsurprising, as many of these individuals come from deindustrialized areas of the state. Moreover, many alumni lived through deindustrialization, observing strikes and layoffs, changing economies of farming, and the challenges of finding work.

Informed by these geographies of class, many participants described social mobility through education as leaving town for better opportunities. Some participants saw college as "a way out" (Baker), a chance "to write your own ticket" (Murray, Mathis) or to get out of town (Rawlings). One jokes, "I used to kid people I learned the 3 R's in school: Reading, Writing, and Route 23," a reference to the highway leading out of town and towards the state's biggest university (Baker). Similarly, many describe going to college to avoid hardship and hard labor. Nick Price, a scholarship dorm resident, says it plainly, "My motivation was to never work at the steel mill," a sentiment echoed by other scholarship dorm residents. These rhetorics of mobility through education are available to the informants who characterize class difference as an effect of bounded material conditions. They can "get out" of the lower classes by relocating to college.

When class awareness emerges as an effect of shifting environments, research participants observe a need to adapt to the new circumstances, sometimes with some difficulty. For example, Leah Evans, a scholarship dorm participant, describes becoming aware of her social class in junior high, when she changed school districts. She explains,

I honestly as a child don't think that we recognized that we were poor because we were pretty much the same as everyone else around us, and that, then, didn't mean anything [. . .] So it wasn't until I went to junior high where we went mixed with kids from the city that we saw bigger differences in what—in how people lived and maybe what people had.

So we kind of noticed that we didn't have much. (Evans)

Similarly, Rawlings describes how class and racial difference represented a significant obstacle in his transition from his racially (and class) homogeneous community in a former steel town to a predominantly white university. He observes, "People talking my whole life: you're at a disadvantage, you're at a disadvantage, you're at a disadvantage. Now for once in my life, I finally saw it. Wow. Yeah, just from a number standpoint, I could see what they mean" (Rawlings). These accounts call attention to the challenge posed by mobility and adaptation as rhetorical strategies by highlighting how experiences of class difference are necessarily intersectional, deeply entwined with race and culture.

Similarly, some rural white research participants observed that home culture was an obstacle to class mobility through education. Edgar Griffith, a white Appalachian scholarship dorm alum, describes seeing his high school friends preparing for college applications. Despite his own participation in high-achievement courses, Griffith did not initially plan to attend college. When he expressed his ambivalence about this situation to his father, Griffith's father responded, "People like us don't go to college." While Griffith ended up attending and graduating from college, he describes how resistance to higher education seems to be part of his family's culture, so that he is the only person in his extended family—including nieces and nephews—to have ever gone to college. Similarly, Maria Wilkins, a white Appalachian alum, describes how she came from "a family that nobody would have ever thought that people would go to college." Her choice to attend college, especially as a woman, was perceived as an act of rebellion. "And people not really valuing education, in the way that, you know . . . It just didn't make sense at all to my dad. Why in the world would you want to do this, when you . . . when you have a good, you know, a good job possibility" (Wilkins). Taken together, these accounts of class awareness and social mobility all frame class phenomena as relatively stable, tied to material conditions such as geographies of work or entrenched racial and cultural difference. This framing also means that for many research participants, one's class background may authorize or constrain ways of seeing. At the same time, these informants' accounts of resisting the determining force of class—by leaving town, for example—demonstrate their sense of agency through literacy.

Research participants' accounts emphasizing adaptation and mobility share with composition pedagogy a framing of college literacies as transformative. Composition theory that locates class influence prior to rhetorical encounters, as growing out of material or cultural difference, frequently frames pedagogy in terms of analyzing systems of oppression and teaching students to challenge or adapt to the conditions of marginalization. Often rooted in economic or sociological theories (such as Marx, Durkheim, or Bourdieu), these frameworks tend to privilege adaptation to existing structures and norms (e.g., Bartholomae, Bloom, O'Dair) or to abstract the conditions of marginalization and analyze or critique their representations in media and culture (e.g., Daniel).

According to this framing, students may be more or less active participants in processes of subjection and recognition; however, the agency for that transformation is located in non-negotiable norms and standards (or distributions of power). Perhaps most iconically, in "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae's descriptions of privileged (classed) discourses and his pedagogical response relies on a subject produced through submission or assimilation to these discourses. He

writes that the “student has to appropriate (or be appropriated by) a specialized discourse . . . ; he has to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language . . . He must learn to speak our language” (61). According to this notion of academic discourse, to write successfully a student must “see herself within a privileged discourse, one that already includes and excludes groups of readers. She must be either equal to or more powerful than those she would address. The writing, then, must somehow transform the political and social relationships” in the classroom (64-65). Similarly, in more recent scholarship, Lynn Bloom advocates for first-year writing as a site where students learn middle-class values, and Sharon O’Dair argues that counter-hegemonic pedagogies undermine the value of exposure (and, implicitly, assimilation) to a “superior cultural world” world (600). In terms of implications for FGC literate positionality, composition theory working from these premises crafts interventions that reinforce narratives of transformation through literacy and which locate agency in the ability to align with and adapt to cultural norms.

Locating Difference Across Rhetorical Environments

This section continues the investigation of FGC literate positionality by turning to working-class identity to consider how class markers inhere to individuals as they traverse rhetorical environments. This framework is valuable for understanding FGC literate positionality because although composition theory of class identity proliferates, among research participants for this project class identity seems less firmly fixed, less coherent as a way to understand difference on campus. This tension, echoing Roper and Edwards’s insights on students’ class identities, suggests the need for a framework for FGC experience that recognizes identity markers may be displaced, devalued, or minimized for rhetorical effect. Moreover, these accounts challenge notions of essential FGC experience at the same time as they affirm students’ investments in shared experience.

Although few participants spoke of their class background in terms of an *identity* that persists across rhetorical environments or time, many advanced a rhetoric of “sameness” or connection with other students participating in programs targeting low-income and first-generation college students. One informant, describing the challenges he faced in his transition to college, spoke of feeling alienated in the dorms because he was “an outdoors person” and his room had no windows (Harris). He also described being more at ease among the students in the agriculture program (located in an area geographically removed from “main campus” but still part of the flagship campus), people he described as keeping their hair cut short, “people that you felt comfortable with because of their background” (Harris). Another informant drew on her family’s blue-collar character as particularly valuable, providing a strong “practical” and “common sense” perspective, even if that same perspective was sometimes a point of tension between her and her family (Wilkins). In these accounts, rural or working-class values are framed as assets for these students’ success in college.

For many alumni who had participated in scholarship dorms, collective identification with other residents was a resource in their college success. Importantly, many suggested that the strength of this identification derived from a quality of “sameness” among residents, an effect of living and working among other low-income scholarship students. Of the thirteen interviews with scholarship dorm

alumni, nine participants describe how being in a program where residents were “in the same boat” meant that they experienced less stigma on campus. Many informants also explain that presuming common backgrounds served to erase difference among residents. Evans notes, “I mean we all knew we all were poor, or at least being eligible to be there meant something. And so there was pretty much a given that nobody’s got a lot of money to work with. So, we didn’t talk about it too much” (Evans). In other words, this homogeneous environment meant that they spent less time talking about class as a political or personal issue.

While collective identification was an important resource for many scholarship dorm residents, this collective identification may also have obscured more subtle differences among residents’ class experiences. For example, whenever a research participant described dorm residents’ economic status as reflecting “sameness,” that individual projected their own class identification onto the group. For example, Boyd Moreno describes dorm residents as “just like me”: “middle class guys from middle class families.” Another describes how “you make friends with people who are like you” (Parker). And another notes that scholarship dorm made the difference for him because “everyone was like me” (Griffith). For many, this sameness served as a resource because, as Griffith argues, “anything that you can identify with other people in a similar circumstance is a good thing” (Baker). While many of the predominantly white alumni of the scholarship dorms laud the value of group identification premised on “sameness,” this rhetoric of sameness is often not readily available to informants whose class experience of college is inextricable from their experience as racial minorities on campus. Moreover, because the scholarship dorms are residential programs, many research participants describe the programs as their primary social space. Members of other FGC retention programs in my study, on the other hand, are not assigned a common space and must instead seek each other out, constraining the rhetorical resources available to those students.

As these accounts suggest, any understanding of FGC literate positionality would likely be incomplete without considering the significance or value of metaphoric identification, a point raised saliently in Rawlings’s account of using identification to negotiate difference with institutional representatives and further reinforced in the scholarship dorm residents’ assertion of the value of “sameness.” At the same time, the lack of strong association among these research participants with traditional class identifiers or even FGC status suggests the limits of frameworks premised on stable or coherent identities. This ambivalence invites nuance of our understanding of literacy and identity, particularly when describing processes by which literate positionality is assigned but resisted. This problem also reiterates the importance of Roper and Edwards’s analysis: if our models for classed identity lack salience or explanatory power for students, then we may need to revisit our shared assumptions.

While composition studies’ perspectives on class continue to develop, pedagogies that challenge assimilationist premises often draw on identity, empowerment, and self-discovery, framing class as inhering to an individual across rhetorical environments. For example, Nick Tingle argues that academic discourses erase an authentic working-class self, that “making the move into university discourse is not simply a matter of ‘inventing’ but also of uprooting” (222). This sense that appropriation of and by academic discourse may be psychic violence also manifests in scholarship

that identifies the sociological ambivalence experienced by working-class students (Lucas). When understood in these terms, classed identities become a site of tension as working-class students “struggle to pass for the right kind of students” in middle-class university environments, fostering a “fear of being unmasked as undeserving” (Mack 56).

Scholars working from this premise seek to counter erasure or devaluation of historically marginalized student experiences through resistant pedagogies that investigate self and community through personal narrative, ethnographic research studies, or other ways of privileging experiential knowledge. Such assignments and pedagogies affirm working-class identities by lending coherence to them as objects of study. Widely advocated among scholar-teachers of working-class students (see Beech, Lindquist, Mack, Robillard), these pedagogies find a powerful voice in scholarship by Nancy Mack. She argues, “If they are to survive at the university, working-class students must construct a position that is not discounted as underprepared or limited to an acceptable imitation of the elite original but a respected, working-class-academic identity” (54). By framing the challenge of working-class learning as one of alienation, assimilation, and identity, this scholarship promotes an understanding of classed identity as a relatively stable, highly salient category for many working-class students.

Like those frameworks that situate class prior to the rhetorical encounter, approaches that suggest class identity persists across rhetorical environments may risk constructing monolithic working-class experiences. Roper and Edwards, cited above, challenge “working class” identity premised on industrial-era divisions of labor (105). Aaron Barlow and Patrick Corbett, in the same collection, point out that even within “working-class” populations, we may observe significant diversity (61). Barlow and Corbett resist the tendency to use “class” in ways that displace or obscure other markers, arguing that “[m]uch traditional scholarship of working-class identity fails to consider how the powerful working-class subjectivities our students bring into the FYC classroom are *hidden subjectivities* without easy correlatives in the scholarship of identity” (65). In thinking about FGC literate positionality, class theories that posit a coherent identity across rhetorical environments may similarly obscure the relational, dynamic, and adaptive elements of class identification.

Locating Difference Within Rhetorical Encounters

Research participants’ accounts of leveraging identification (rather than identity) may suggest an underlying perspective that frames class not as a fixed category determined prior to a rhetorical encounter but rather as an aggregate of behaviors and practices operating within and constitutive of such encounters. This section explores the affordances of understanding students’ classed experiences on campus as structured by encounters with literacy sponsors and others. This framework is valuable for understanding FGC literate positionality because this perspective may serve as scaffolding for understanding how students who do not use the FGC identifier may yet advance rhetorics of difference that resonate with a constitutive rhetorical framework of literate positionality. Foregrounding the shifting and relational aspects of class, such a perspective advances a dynamic notion of class and creates space for investigating how “first-generation college” identification may be situated within

larger discussions of students' rhetorics of difference.

In addition to identifying class phenomena as fixed circumstances or articulating nascent class consciousness grounded in metaphorical identification or "sameness," many research participants advanced rhetorics of difference that suggest an understanding of class phenomena as an aggregate of behaviors and practices operating within and constituted by a rhetorical encounter. Rhetorical practices associated with this framework include disidentifying with their low-income background and accounts of class "passing" that suggest for many, class could be erased by context or behaviors. Another tactic for students operating within this rhetoric of difference included suggesting that college attendance itself erases class difference. For example, Julia Lamb, a student participating in a "bridge" program for FGC students, notes that she grew up poor but that it does not really matter because "we're all here for the same thing." Juan Dominguez, a first-generation student who is unaffiliated with retention programs that many other informants participated in, describes how his status as a college student complicates his class identification:

Class. What class would I be? Let's see. I mean, I'm a college student, so hopefully that has room to change. My family, you can say they're poor, but I hope I'm hopefully going to make a change. So right now, I'm—I don't know how exactly to define myself, because I'm guessing college is the time where you can start to define yourself and see where you go.

While these students' material situations certainly position them as working class by many definitions, the notion of a working-class *identity* is not meaningful to these students, in part because they are invested in the transformative class function of higher education.

Similarly, some informants suggested that, under the right circumstances, a savvy performance can erase class difference. For example, Nick Price, a scholarship dorm alum, recounts learning to erase class difference in high school. Frustrated at being marked by class, he talks about his strategies for coping: "If you were an athlete, if you were good at school, if you had a nice personality, you begin to blend. But that was a hard thing to break through, and it still bothered me at times, that people looked at you as inferior. It was a great life lesson for me" (Price). Dan Little, also a white scholarship dorm resident, similarly describes how his class identity was not a sticking point for social encounters, testifying that "[it] just never dawned on me that I was in any way lower class. I mean, I, you know, I asked out the best-looking girls from high school." Having learned the cultural codes that signal status, these individuals are able to "blend" by imitation. However, these informants' racial positioning, gender, and sexuality also affect the ease with which they are able to "blend."

We might observe the limitations of performances of class passing for black students in my study, many of whom characterize their experience on a predominantly white campus in terms of alienation. Sadie Burton describes being asked to be the representative of the black race for her classes but otherwise, in classes or campus organizations, "to keep [her] diversity over there." Similarly, Olivia Bailey describes feeling hyper-visible in the dorms and being asked to be quiet when she and other black students were watching TV, even if another group were being louder. In both of these instances, we might observe the limits to performance—regardless of how well these students perform middle-class values, or how the university pays lip service to diversity, these students are still confronted with others' prejudicial gaze.

For some students, performing “good student” subjectivity also means compartmentalizing the stress they feel about what may be happening at home. For example, Rawlings describes how his family’s legal problems felt like they followed him to college, including being kicked out of his home by his mother, his stepfather’s and brother’s arrests, and an impending custody battle over his younger siblings. He says, “and I finally get here, and it’s just like now I’m supposed to pretty much turn all that—you know, flip that switch off and turn on this one, you know, be a student” (Rawlings). Here again we see a limit to performance, in this instance, located in how he must juggle competing home and school subjectivities.

Just as some students’ accounts demonstrate the need to perform or “blend” in middle class contexts on campus, some describe being expected to perform economic need, to justify their inclusion in the need-based scholarship programs or even among friends. Some scholarship dorm alumni point out that they were not allowed to have cars on campus because car ownership signaled a financial standing in contradiction with economic need at the time they were residents. And among current students, one woman describes how owning branded electronics (an iPad or “Beats by Dre” headphones) means that her friends call her out for being “rich.” She explains, when people ask where her nice things come from, “I either say my dad got it for me, it was a gift, or I actually bought it for myself. And, it’s not like I’m rich. There are nine people in my house, so we do struggle throughout the month. But I work for everything that I get” (Bailey). This frustration not only speaks to campus dynamics but also gestures towards a larger cultural problematic of policing poor folks’ property. Owning nice things, even if she worked and saved for them, runs counter to how she is expected to perform financial need.

These accounts not only demonstrate that processes of self-definition figure prominently in research participants’ navigation of difference on campus but also that these performances are constrained by material circumstance and subject to or contained within larger cultural narratives (e.g., what it means to be “poor” or being a “good student” when home commitments undermine that performance). In composition studies, Min-Zhan Lu’s pedagogy of repositioning and Donna LeCourt’s performative theory of class difference represent two models that suggest class phenomena is situated within a rhetorical encounter. These approaches address the field’s tendency to obscure how working-class and academic discourses are situated within dynamic economic and material conditions. Lu, advancing a pedagogy of class “that recognizes that it is always under construction, always being negotiated, and always felt and enacted in relation to other classes, discourses, and power structures,” invites compositionists to consider how class relationships are “produced *in our classrooms*” through the privileging of academic discourse and the marginalization of non-academic and working-class discourses (45). Foregrounding the “range of competing discourses” (18) students negotiate on campus, Lu’s pedagogy of repositioning calls for students to observe and respond to “dissonance in and between discourses without finally treating such dissonance as either a problem to be eliminated or a harmonious polyphony to be accepted but rather as a means to problematize the dominance of the hegemonic” (21).

Whereas Lu’s pedagogy of repositioning focuses on the role hegemonic academic discourse plays in reinscribing class difference, LeCourt argues that we should view “class as both economically

structured and culturally fluid” (45). Drawing on class theory by Michael Zweig, she writes that “we need a perspective on class that recognizes that it is always under construction, always being negotiated, and always felt and enacted in relation to other classes, discourses, and power structures” (45). Taken in conversation with student accounts here, we might observe that viewing class as positioning or performance, and seeing these performances as intentional, motivated, and persuasive, means taking note of how working-class students amplify or diminish their class identification on campus. In terms of FGC literate positionality, then, we need a framework that recognizes both the significance of self-definition and cultural performance while also accounting for constraining forces of material difference.

Conclusion

This article has sought to initiate a conversation about FGC as a marker of difference, observing its potential value to institutions and students while also placing the concept in the context of students’ broader experiences of difference—especially class difference—on campus. Working from the premise that individuals’ relationships with literacy and literacy sponsors intersects with but exceeds the relationship between self and community often characterized by “identity,” this article has explored the interplay between self-constitution through literacy—including observing student rhetorics of difference foregrounding mobility or self-definition through performance—and forces of other-constitution.

As a marker designating a relationship between students and institutions, and as a term that may be gaining salience but which is easily displaced by other markers of difference, FGC demonstrates rhetorical potential in interactions with institutional representatives, as Rawlings’s case study illustrates. The term’s “big tent” construction encourages FGC students to seek connections across difference, whether with institutional representatives who model commitments to institutional literacies or with students who are “in the same boat.” The potential for metaphoric identification, for students to find people who are “like” them, figures prominently in understanding how FGC literate positionality functions rhetorically among this study’s research participants.

While not necessarily a marker of economic need, research participants’ accounts of being the first in their family to attend college demonstrates how many of them grapple with classed expectations and phenomena. Although these classed phenomena exceed the constitutive function of the FGC marker (e.g., Harris’s challenge as an outdoors person on an urban campus or Griffith’s and Wilkins’s family resistance to college), they also reflect the ways that FGC literate positionality is intersectional, overdetermined, and subject to rhetorical processes that condition the ways students see themselves on campus. In this respect, understanding FGC literate positionality necessitates engagement with constitutive functions of classed phenomena.

The FGC marker—in overlapping with but also troubling the models for class influence—also encourages us to recognize that one social consequence of literacy is the constitutive process of naming, positioning, and regulating literate subjects. For the FGC marker, the rhetorical potential of this identifier depends on the circumstances in which one is identified as FGC; in the absence

of a constituting encounter, “first-generation college” will be displaced by more salient markers of difference or by a normative narrative of “the college experience.”

This article has explored the complexities facing attempts to reflexively engage with FGC identification and has sought to enrich our understanding of FGC as a literate positionality by examining the rhetorics of difference that inform some students’ strategies for navigating classed campus spaces. By placing these experiences in conversation with models for class in composition, we may become cognizant of the gaps between our models and our students’ models for understanding difference on campus. This awareness may serve us as we adapt our approaches to changing economic and social contexts for student literacies.

NOTES

¹See Cataldi, et al. (2018) for recent reports on enrollment trends among FGC students. See Hoxby and Avery (2013) for analysis of FGC college choice.

²Deborah Brandt defines literacy sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19).

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