Story Sharing for First-Generation College Students Attending a Regional Comprehensive University: Campus Outreach to Validate Students and Develop Forms of Capital

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Introduction

First-generation, working-class, and financially insecure (FGWCFI) college students can be described as skilled and tenacious, but they face a unique set of challenges that have been the subject of increased research and activism (Hinz, 2016; London, 1989; Warnock & Hurst, 2016). FGWCFI students are also more likely to come from diverse backgrounds that are underrepresented on campus, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) argues that the needs of this student population vary widely (Chen & Carroll, 2005). Students from FGWCFI backgrounds may experience class–cultural mismatch that leads to misunderstanding, or ambivalence about college generally (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Hurst, 2010). For FGWCFI students from racial-minority and other marginalized backgrounds, finding validation and developing a sense of belonging on campus as a student can be a particularly important struggle (Jehangir et al., 2015; Pyne & Means, 2013; Rendon, 1994; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). Some observers conclude that the significantly low college persistence rates among first-generation students can be directly traced to their status as first-generation students (Nunez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). While a number of post-secondary institutions have developed resource-based transitional programs geared toward improving first-generation college student success rates (Stephens et al., 2015), a promising approach frequently overlooked is to use validation-based programs as a tool for improving first-generation student academic outcomes (Davis, 2012; Rendon, 1994).

Over the last few decades, post-secondary institutions in the US have seen a dramatic increase in the enrollment of "first-generation college students," defined as students who are the first members in their family to attend college (Balemian & Feng, 2013; Christopher, 2005). Public institutions have enrolled higher proportions of first-generation college students among first-time full-time students than private institutions. But that gap narrowed over previous decades, with public universities enrolling 17.5% first-generation students and private institutions enrolling 12.8% in 2005 (Saenz et al., 2007). Often referred to as "the people's universities," state comprehensive universities commonly emphasize access for all students over selectivity (Henderson, 2009). Bridgewater State University, like many other state comprehensive universities, enrolls a majority of students from one or more of these backgrounds (Office of Institutional Research, 2016a).

Despite calls for research on institutional programs that might improve the experiences of FGWCFI students (Stephens et al., 2012), little consideration has been given to understanding the importance of validating FGWCFI college experiences. As Stephens et al. (2012) point out, many students "are led to believe that they [upon entering college] will finally be able to separate and distinguish themselves from their parents and to realize their individual potential." Additionally, FGWCFI students often have little access to social, cultural, and psychological capital, which are essential for making the most of college opportunities (Allen et al., 2013; Ball, 2003; Smith, 2009). For FGWCFI students from other underrepresented backgrounds, including commuter students, non-traditionally aged students, and racial minority students, campus support systems can be particularly important as they search for models to guide their own success (Jehangir et al., 2015; Pyne & Means, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). For black and Hispanic students in particular, interacting with diverse peers and seeing faculty and administrators representing their identity can be important, fostering a sense of belonging (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012).

Although observers generally agree that college is fraught with uncertainty for many FGWCFI students, research has largely overlooked both programs and mechanisms that might improve student validation and these forms of capital. We attempt to fill this gap by exploring the impact of our Our Stories program. The emphasis on Our Stories is important, because it begins to specify the value of low-cost targeted interventions that may improve student academic and social outcomes. Furthermore, because this program supported people of FGWCFI status, and because people from these backgrounds costitute a large proportion of students, faculty, and staff at state comprehensive universities, we believe this program offers a model for supporting the success of FGWCFI students at other such institutions.

Sharing personal information can be problematic, personally and professionally, for faculty and staff members at any institution, in part because it may incur skepticism or a challenge to one's positional authority. However, we found that sharing stories of our FGWCFI backgrounds created a space of support and validation for the storytellers as valued voices in the institution, while also validating students of these backgrounds and supporting the development of their social, cultural, and psychological capital.

Challenges Faced by First-Generation, Working-Class, and Financially Insecure Students

First-generation, working class, and financially insecure students often face unique challenges beyond academic and financial ones, including the need to navigate social environments and institutional cultures that do not match their cultural background (Hurst, 2007, 2010; Petty, 2014; Pyne & Means, 2013; Stephens et al., 2012). Students from these backgrounds may feel ambivalent about college, sensing its importance for their career and success in life, but not knowing how to successfully manage the college landscape and understanding that rising education costs may be putting the American Dream out of reach (Banks-Santilli,

2014). For FGWCFI students from other marginalized backgrounds, finding their identities represented among faculty and administrators on campus can be an important mechanism for supporting their success (Castellanos & Jones, 2003). Further, students may dread how the college experience changes their relationships with their family and social class position (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015; Hinz, 2016; Piorkowski, 1983). As a consequence, students may struggle to develop a sense that they belong in college at all (Rendon, 1994). Research suggests that involving students in a range of social and educational programs is necessary for preparing them to overcome the challenges they will face in college (Warnock & Hurst, 2016). For students of various marginal identities, establishing and maintaining a sense of belonging is an important aspect of student success and a fundamental motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012).

Students from working-class backgrounds face a variety of challenges in higher education. Soria (2015) recognizes that such students, regardless of financial standing, have been "historically marginalized" (p. 19). Higher-education institutions often operate around middle-class norms, especially with a focus on independence, and this can function as a significant barrier to the success of first-generation college students, especially those from working-class backgrounds (Hinz, 2016; Hurst, 2007; Warnock & Hurst, 2016). These students often struggle to learn an institution's "hidden curriculum," creating dilemmas that exacerbate class inequality on campus and in rates of student success (Anyon, 1983; Soria, 2015). This suggests continued action is needed to address the many social inequalities that exist on college campuses in hopes of leveling the playing field, regardless of the background of the student (Stephens et al., 2012). Raque-Bogdan and Lucas (2016) suggest that a useful campus outreach intervention point may be addressing student perception of their parents' role in the development of their career goals.

Students from racial minority backgrounds often experience "impostorism" or family achievement guilt (Austin et al., 2009; Bernard et al., 2017; Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). For these students who are also from FGWCFI backgrounds, these challenges may be compounded. Research identifies a variety of strategies to support the success of these students based on their racial background (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). The support strategies that are focused on supporting FGWCFI backgrounds can help address the class-based challenges that students representing a range of other marginal identities also face based on their FGWCFI background (Jehangir et al., 2015; Stephens et al., 2015).

Social class differences are often at the root of misunderstandings between students and professors (Cox, 2009). Cultural mismatch theory helps explain some of these misunderstandings, explaining in part why some first-generation students struggle in university settings (Stephens et al., 2012). This theory makes three main claims: 1) American universities tend to operate on middle-class norms of independence; 2) students who come to the university with middle-class norms will have an advantage over those who come with working-class norms, who embrace the contrasting norms of interdependency; and 3) these contrasting norms can have

a detrimental effect on students' performance in the university setting, as they must learn to operate more independently (Stephens et al., 2012). Cultural mismatches may lead to misunderstandings and lower grades, especially if students' struggles are not validated by their professor (Cox, 2009; Showalter, 2012).

Stebleton et al. (2014) compare first-generation and non-first-generation students and find lower rates of sense of belonging, higher levels of depression and stress, and lower utilization of mental health services among first-generation students. They note that more research is needed on the demographics related to the use of these services, with a specific understanding that men and students of color are less likely to utilize these types of resources, as previous research suggests. There are many ways for university faculty and staff to promote positive messages and reinforce the importance of taking advantage of mental health services available on campus (Lee et al., 2009). Drawing greater awareness to these services can help first-generation students feel more comfortable accessing them (Stebleton et al., 2014).

Another issue often encountered by first-generation college students is described as survivor guilt (Piorkowski, 1983), breakaway guilt (London, 1989), or family achievement guilt (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Previous research suggests that many first-generation students are conflicted between feeling proud of their academic achievements and feeling guilty about how their absence in everyday life will impact their home (Piorkowski, 1983). Covarrubias & Fryberg (2015) expanded this research to examine whether first-generation students would also feel guilty for surpassing the academic accomplishments of their family members. Research on survivor guilt, particularly in the university setting, is most prominent among the African American community. Austin et al. (2009) find a positive relationship between African American students and depressive symptoms surrounding survivor guilt. Their research suggests that family achievement guilt often exists because going to college and pursuing one's own interest does not align with the working-class norms of focusing on the needs of one's family (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Hinz, 2016; Hurst, 2007, 2010; London, 1989). The mismatch of class cultural norms, particularly among minority students, can make adjustment to a university setting more difficult, especially as students may not feel a sense of belonging or validation as students (Hinz, 2016; Hurst, 2007, 2010; Jehangir, 2009, 2010; London, 1989; Rendon, 1994).

Status as a first-generation, working-class, or financially insecure student also intersects with other marginalized identities (Jehangir et al., 2015; Soria, 2015). Of further concern is the extent to which students' backgrounds constrain or promote the development of their identities as students (Torres et al., 2009). For students in these circumstances, finding representation among faculty and administrators on campus is often important for their success (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Pyne & Means, 2013; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). Research suggests that both social and cultural capital are increasingly important in the competition for a decreasing number of good jobs, suggesting that these forms of capital would be similarly crucial for college student success, as they promote students' ability to develop

skills and make the most of college opportunities (Allen et al., 2013; Ball, 2003; Smith, 2009).

Social capital can be defined as a person's social network, or as Putnam (2001) explains, it is made up of the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). Greater social capital, or a more diverse social network, can be valuable to an individual (Erickson, 2003; Granovetter, 1973). FGWCFI students often lack particular forms of social capital (Pascarella et al., 2004; Stephens et al., 2012) that can be useful on campus, for example, having established relationships with older students or mentors who can answer questions the student may have about dilemmas they encounter.

Cultural capital includes education, style of speech and dress, and physical appearance, and may be thought of as any non-monetary asset in social life (Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital can be understood as what an individual draws on to know how to "fit in" in various social settings. For example, some people may know which fork to use for the first course at a fancy restaurant, while others may not. Not feeling like one fits in on college campuses is a common struggle for FGWCFI students (Pascarella et al., 2004). As Yosso (2005) illustrates, students of color bring several forms of cultural capital from their homes and communities to campus, and it is imperative for higher education institutions to acknowledge the value of this capital. Many students of color possess greater or lesser amounts of navigational culture: the capital that supports an ability to navigate social institutions that were created without reference to their marginal identities. FGWCFI students similarly possess valuable forms of cultural capital that help them navigate various social settings before coming to campus. For many students from such backgrounds, though, further development of their cultural capital will improve their ability to interpret the hidden curriculum and navigate the middle-class norms of their institution.

Psychological capital is described as the emotional resources, including confidence and resilience, that are critical for overcoming the occasional failure or setback. Psychological capital is "an individual's positive psychological state of development" (Luthans, Youssef, & Avolio, 2007, *Psychological Capital*, quoted in Luthans et al., 2007, p. 542) and is characterized by: 1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to succeed at a challenging task; 2) having positive expectations about the future (optimism); 3) finding different ways around obstacles (hope); and 4) staying motivated to reach positive outcomes in adverse circumstances (Luthans et al., 2007). Taken together, these resources represent a powerful construct that predicts performance and learning contexts. For example, Schunk (1985) has shown that self-efficacy appraisals are particularly important when individuals begin new learning tasks or new activities, which characterize resources needed by many first-generation college students. Snyder et al. (1991) argue that hope is important for navigating difficult social environments insofar as high-hope individuals may use strategies to overcome obstacles such as having an unsupportive study group. Optimism researchers find that optimists believe positive things will happen to

them in the future because they use external attributions to bounce back from failure (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Finally, resilience research shows that resilience impacts how individuals use personal assets such as positive emotions to reduce the experience of negative emotion (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

The development of social, cultural, and psychological capital among the program attendees is also an important outcome, because it is the lack of these forms of capital that defines the struggles faced by FGWCFI students. For these students, developing a sense of belonging and various forms of capital is pivotal for their success in college. The story-sharing program described in this study works specifically to validate students, encourage their sense of belonging, and encourage the development of their social, cultural, and psychological capital.

Existing Programs and Forms of Outreach

Various programs and outreach efforts across many campuses focus on FGWCFI students, but many of the best-established programs have been developed at prestigious private or flagship public schools, where a minority of students are from these backgrounds (Warnock & Hurst, 2016). One example, Brown University's First Generation College Student Initiative, is a programming collaboration between Brown's Division of Campus Life & Student Services, the Office of the Dean of the College, and the student organization First Generation College Students at Brown. It works to provide both academic and social opportunities, and is open to anyone who feels they may benefit from participating.

At the University of Michigan, a First Generation Students group has also formed, with the support of several faculty members (Gearig, 2015). Elston (2015) describes Purdue Calumet's use of the Complete College America (CCA) "Game Changer" strategies to introduce behavioral-based interventions and institutional-level policies to examine student graduation rates and continued enrollment. Purdue promoted this program in a number of ways, such as updating their advising practices, requiring advisors to promote the "Fifteen to Finish" message to their students, and advertising the message in university-wide orientation literature (Elston, 2015). Elston finds that after this program was implemented, more students at Purdue Calumet chose to enroll in the 15-credit hour per semester model.

Various organizations have emerged between campuses as well. For example, I'm First!, an online community founded by Center for Student Opportunity (CSO), aims to provide first-generation college students and their advisors with support and information about college. The CSO won the College Knowledge Challenge, a grant competition sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Facebook, College Summit, and King Center Charter School, and this helped them in establishing I'm First!. Similarly, the website Firstgenerationstudent.com is an external resource that, according to the website, "is devoted to helping first-generation college students navigate the college application process, from beginning to end and beyond." This website involves participants from a variety of locations in higher education and encourages current, potential, and former students to ask questions and share their stories.

Last spring, a *New York Times* article noted that student activism on FGWCFI student issues is growing on college campuses across the country (Pappano, 2015). Many of these groups have formed on elite, large, or private campuses. An example of this is 1vyG, which emerged at Brown University but now connects student groups between several Ivy League institutions with activities including an annual conference. Whereas many of these recent initiatives have taken root at private institutions, there has been a dearth of research on programs developed and implemented in regional, public universities or community colleges. Because students from FGWCFI backgrounds are often a majority at regional state comprehensive institutions, student support efforts may have an even larger impact at these institutions.

Institutional Context and Origin of the Stories Program

Founded as a normal school, Bridgewater State University is a public state comprehensive university in Southeastern Massachusetts, the largest of nine institutions in the Massachusetts State University system. According to BSU's *Factbook 2015–2016*, in fall 2015, BSU enrolled 9,608 undergraduate and 1,481 graduate students. Among undergraduates, 41% were male, 21% were students of color, 83% were enrolled as full-time students, and 96% were from Massachusetts (Office of Institutional Research, 2016a). Among first-time, full-time freshmen at BSU, 28.8% of women and 41.9% of men were 19 years or older, compared to 31.0% of women and 22.8% of men nationally. Additionally, in a survey of fall 2015 first-time freshmen, 74.5% of BSU students reported that cost was "very important" in their choice of college, compared to 59.4% nationwide (Office of Institutional Research, 2016a).

The BSU 2015 Campus Climate Survey Final Report, compiled by BSU's Office of Institutional Research, revealed additional interesting information about the institutional context for students at BSU. In 2015, the survey received responses from 348 students, more than 300 of which were from undergraduate students (Office of Institutional Research, 2016b). Among undergraduate respondents, about 59% were first-generation college students, about 33% were low income, and 17% were students of color. Among all student respondents, about 66% reported that they agree or strongly agree that "I feel like I belong here," which was down 3% from the 2012 survey. Also among all undergraduate respondents, about 66% responded that they agree or strongly agree that "I feel that there is a faculty or staff member at BSU that I can talk to," up 2% from 2012. Among all student respondents, 56% reported that they agree or strongly agree that "faculty, staff members, and administrators at BSU are sensitive to the needs of all types of students," down 4% from 2012. Finally, 73% of all student respondents reported that they agree or strongly agree that "BSU provides the support students need to succeed academically." Interestingly, 69% of faculty and librarian respondents and 80% of staff respondents reported that they agree or strongly agree that "Some of the friends I have made at BSU are from a very different background than mine" (n = 176 and 199, respectively).

In late 2014–15, faculty and staff from across our university began meeting to discuss the ongoing challenges facing first-generation college students. There was a realization, particularly among a cohort of recently hired faculty, that not only does our institution host a majority of first-generation college students, but that many of our faculty and staff went to college from FGWCFI backgrounds. One member of this cohort published an essay in the university's *Bridgewater Review* that highlighted his experience as a new faculty member who was also a first-generation college student, and later he and another faculty member wrote about the value of various forms of capital for student success in the same campus publication (King, 2014; King & Griffith, 2015). Conversations grew among a group of faculty and staff from these backgrounds, and faculty and staff participants began organizing various outreach efforts whose goals included celebrating the diverse backgrounds of our faculty and staff, normalizing these experiences for students, and supporting student success.

While these activities emerged organically through concerned faculty and staff, and not out of any specific efforts from particular offices or divisions on campus, the efforts did receive substantial institutional support. For example, in the beginning our faculty union sponsored a small, preliminary version of the Our Stories program featuring two of the authors here. As news spread of this event, other members of the institution, including the administration, became involved and supported the efforts in a variety of ways. The Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences supported the development of the program from the early stages, eventually sharing her story as a panelist in one of the programs. An Associate Provost attended group meetings and assisted with small group discussion at several of the programs. The Vice President for Student Success and Diversity provided guidance on organization and strategy, while a faculty associate in that office provided additional support in planning the Our Stories event. The College of Humanities and Social Sciences provided funding for refreshments at several Our Stories events, with funding for refreshments at the most recent program being supported by the Office of Student Success and Diversity. The University's President hosted a dinner meeting with lead organizers of Class Beyond the Classroom (CBtC). The support from administration was instrumental and socially supportive.

Each fall the organization has recruited new participants by announcing scheduled meetings and by recruiting individuals to participate in various events, and the continued participation of faculty and staff has made it possible for the organization to host an Our Stories event each semester. CBtC members have also participated in activities beyond these programs, including new student orientation, encouraging the formation of an FGWCFI student group, and organizing students to participate in Class Action's First Gen Student Summit.

Why Story-Sharing?

Story-sharing has been demonstrated as an important form of validation (Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). The very act of sharing personal stories affirms the

identity of both the sharer and the listener and further supports the meaning-making process (Nora et al., 2011). Some scholars argue that storytelling invites caring and empathy in those who hold the role as listener (Rendon, 1994). Jehangir (2009, 2010) says institutions that value students' experiences also help to foster a sense of connection between those students and the university, giving them a feeling that they are active members of a campus community; this in turn improves students' academic involvement and levels of engagement. Awareness and normalization of these issues is essential for positive progress, given that research suggests that validating first-generation college student experiences can improve their academic outcomes (Davis, 2012).

We therefore used story-sharing to build awareness of this important social issue and to validate our students, encouraging their sense of belonging while fostering the development of their social, cultural, and psychological capital. Because students from FGWCFI backgrounds often struggle with class–cultural mismatch, and even ambivalence about college, we felt that sharing stories from a variety of FGWCFI perspectives, especially with faculty and staff who experienced these struggles, would be useful for our students (Banks-Santilli, 2014; Hurst, 2007, 2010; Petty, 2014; Pyne & Means, 2013; Stephens et al., 2012). These kinds of interactions may provide models and foster mentorship relationships, especially for FGWCFI students from other marginalized backgrounds (Castellanos & Jones, 2003; Jehangir et al., 2015; Strayhorn, 2008, 2012). We shared stories from a variety of perspectives and storytellers, including diverse perspectives on race, gender, and sexuality. We believe that a focus on these outcomes supports development for all students and can provide collegial support for faculty and staff from FGWCFI backgrounds.

Stories Program and Assessment

The Stories program events were one hour long and scheduled during regular class times so that professors could bring their classes. The moderator, who was also the lead organizer of CBtC, introduced panelists who shared a brief version of their own story. Three faculty or staff panelists then shared 10-minute versions of their stories of being first-generation, working-class, or financially insecure college students. Story details from the various panelists were diverse, ranging from homelessness during college, and taking years off between starting college and graduating, to dilemmas over communicating about college with family, paying for college and student loan debt, and finding emotional support. Panelists represented a range of age, gender, geography, and race, and each reflected on their individual circumstances, describing how their identities variously created privileges and challenges for them as college students. They also shared their strategies for success, and encouraged students to feel comfortable reaching out to them for support. They reminded students that if they are experiencing challenges around these circumstances, they are not alone on our campus. After the three stories, the moderator invited students and discussion leaders to talk within their small groups, answering guided questions (see Appendix A). Students sat at round tables, with a

discussion leader at each. Student participants were not asked to disclose their own circumstances, but many did throughout the course of the programs, especially in the small group discussions.

For this paper, we examine three Our Stories programs, which were convened in fall 2015, spring 2016, and fall 2016 semesters. For each event, the panel discussion was advertised widely across campus using various forms of social media, campus flyers, in-class announcements, and word of mouth. Faculty across campus were encouraged to bring whole classes to the event, and occasionally panelists brought their own class. We designed these events to be open to the whole campus community and to foster support for FGWCFI students among all of our institution's students, faculty, and staff. Not every student in our institution is first-generation, working-class, or financially insecure, but a majority are. We framed the stories and discussion so that students who may be interested might engage with the event and so that individual students, whether attending on their own or as part of a class activity, could decide on their interest and involvement in these activities as audience members regardless of their own circumstances. Each event attracted 45–85 student attendees, with about 200 total students attending.

A Qualtrics survey to assess outcomes for this event, developed with the help of our institution's Office of Assessment, was distributed via e-mail to students who had shared their e-mail address on the sign-in sheet at any of the three stories events. We collected 51 student responses to the surveys. After the first event and survey, additional questions were added to the survey. These two iterations of the survey received 30 responses, and the response pool will be specified when these questions are discussed below.

Tables 1, 2, and 3 in Appendix B record the results of these surveys. Of the 51 respondents, 26 were first-year students, 4 were sophomores, 10 were juniors, and 11 were seniors. Twenty-two reported being commuter students, a proportion that is roughly representative of our university's student body; 37 respondents identified as female, 38 identified as white, and 30 reported being required to attend the event as part of a class.

While the focus of these events was on sharing stories of faculty and staff who came to work at our institution from FGWCFI backgrounds, we sought outcomes that had a positive impact for all students, regardless of their circumstances. In particular, we aimed to strengthen students' validation and sense of belonging at our institution, while encouraging the development of their various forms of capital. We believe that while these forms of capital are critical for FGWCFI students, these events should help all student attendees develop them.

Findings

Validation. As explained above, one of the goals of these events was to validate the first-generation, working class, and financially insecure students at our institution. In the second two iterations of the survey, we asked several questions that aimed to assess the impact of this programming on respondents' sense of validation. Among the 30 respondents, 25 reported that they "strongly

agree" or "agree somewhat" with the statement that having participated in this session, they "feel that my teachers and the staff understand the challenges going on in my life." Additionally, 22 of the 30 respondents reported that they "strongly agree" or "agree somewhat" with the statement "I feel like I belong to this institution."

By celebrating skills and abilities of people from FGWCFI backgrounds while fostering this sense of validation, these events also address the dilemma of cultural mismatch. Many of the stories shared celebrated the unique perspective and skills that panelists gained from their backgrounds, and by sharing their stories in these events, we were able to break down class culture boundaries. The evidence suggests that the stories normalized many of the struggles that students from these situations experience, and validated all students from these circumstances as students who belong in our institution. Indeed, when asked "What was your greatest takeaway from the panel presentation?" one student responded, "How in-line some of my own experiences are with other people's, and that I'm not alone." In this way, these events provide validation for these students, and encourage a sense of belonging among FGWCFI students.

The Capitals. Substantial evidence from these events suggests that the events fostered the development of social, cultural, and psychological capital among student attendees as well. Making social connections among diversely situated people is critical to developing social capital. Of the 51 respondents to all three surveys, 46 said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that this event "Helped me to make connections between my personal story and the stories of other individuals on campus and in different locations in the institution." Faculty have since reported that students who attended this event have followed up in making social connections with them both in person and through social networks, including LinkedIn.

Additionally, several respondents reported building relationships with fellow students. One survey respondent wrote that they "enjoyed being able to sit and speak to upperclassmen about their views." Such responses suggest that student attendees were not only making connections that would build their social capital, but were also appreciating the value of these connections. As one respondent wrote, "Our classmates are as great a resource as anyone."

While social capital is important, so is cultural capital. Much of the evidence collected suggests that these events supported the development of cultural capital among student attendees. Awareness of norms and social expectations is an important part of cultural capital. Of the 51 respondents to all three surveys, 47 said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that this event "Increased my awareness of how individuals from working-class and first-generation backgrounds often encounter unexpected difficulties in college." Additionally, 31 of the 51 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the event they attended "Inspired me to tell my own story," which suggests an awareness that their story would be both normal and valuable to share on campus.

We also observed that out of these events emerged many student–faculty and student–staff interactions that demonstrated students exercising their cultural capital. An attendee at one stories event accepted an invitation from a faculty member to be a panelist at a conference in which the student described her experiences as a first-generation college student. Additionally, in spring 2016, faculty and staff involved with the group that facilitated these stories events were able to recruit several students from among event attendees to participate in other activities, including a First-generation College Student Summit at another campus and a digital storytelling workshop hosted on our campus.

We also found evidence that this event fostered psychological capital among student attendees. Of the 51 respondents to all three surveys, 45 said they agreed or strongly agreed that this event "Helped me to identify my expectations and goals for my college experience, major, and career outcomes to make the most of the opportunities available on campus." Of the 30 respondents to the second two iterations of the survey, 26 said they "strongly agree" or "agree somewhat" with the statement "I feel confident in my ability to succeed in this university." Furthermore, 28 of the 30 said they "strongly agree" or "agree somewhat" with the statement "I feel like I can manage difficulties one way or another." Qualitative responses also demonstrated that these events supported the development of psychological capital; as one respondent wrote, "The stories inspired me to have more self-confidence in knowing that I will not be a failure."

Additional Assessment

Perhaps the best indicator of the value of these stories events is that when asked what other types of events sponsored by this faculty and staff group would they want to attend, the majority of students preferred more of these events. A few survey respondents selected workshops and pizza parties with professors, but many more—39 of 51 respondents—favored additional story events.

Although students were not asked to disclose their first-generation college student identities during the stories events, 21 of the 51 survey respondents identified as such, and five identified as "unsure." This is generally reflective of our institution, where a slight majority of students are first-generation college students. As explained above, the outcomes of these events support all students while particularly validating first-generation college students. From the evidence, though, it seems that many first-generation students who responded to the survey felt positively impacted by the stories events. As one respondent explained, "I feel like my institution has been helping me find my identity more than I ever could." Another wrote, "From listening to these stories I felt inspired. Since starting college adjusting to my new setting has been hard for me especially without having family members to lean on and it was nice hearing from those who had similar situations and how they overcame it."

Discussion

The experiences of first-generation, working-class, and financially insecure students in higher education continue to be fraught with difficulties. A wide variety of organizations, programs, and efforts have mobilized around addressing the unique challenges these students face. As our example illustrates, efforts to support FGWCFI students are important at all institutions. While students from these backgrounds may often be in a majority at regional comprehensive universities, they often deal with the same challenges as their counterparts at elite and private institutions. Efforts to support these students at regional comprehensive universities may be one way to support a broad set of students while advancing the institution's mission. Sharing stories of these struggles and normalizing these experiences can be a profound first step toward improving awareness of these issues throughout institutions and among all students. Offering students a variety of means by which to improve their social, cultural, and psychological capital, while they manage the challenges of higher education, can support student success both on campus and after graduation.

Story-sharing events like the one described in this article can be an effective tool for accomplishing these goals. At regional state comprehensive universities where many faculty and staff often hail from these backgrounds, such faculty and staff may serve as models for students. By sharing their stories, these individuals can validate student experiences and build social and cultural capital while working to prevent cultural mismatch. In particular, this pilot study demonstrates how these events can build awareness across institutions and normalize these experiences. While students from FGWCFI backgrounds may be in the majority at BSU and other state comprehensive universities, many may be unaware of their own status and how this background may be shaping their experiences. Increasing dialogue about these issues helps students to recognize that they are not alone, and it can make explicit that their institution of higher education is interested in helping them to face their unique challenges, while creating a sense that these students belong throughout campus. These efforts, then, disrupt patterns of cultural mismatch while fostering inclusivity. They also highlight how story-sharing events can facilitate growth of social, cultural, and psychological capital among attendees. Altogether, these efforts support student abilities and confidence, as well as their sense that they can reach out for assistance. These efforts represent one unique but substantial initiative that helps support the success of FGWCFI students, and this program is likely replicable at other similar institutions.

While the evidence we provide suggests this program is successful in supporting students, we recognize several limitations. One is the lack of baseline assessment measures. The observed ratings may have been higher had we assessed students before they attended the story-sharing program. However, this research is instructive because it aims to assess whether story sharing can impact awareness of the issues affecting first-generation college students, and therefore points to another potential program that could be used by faculty and administrators seeking to address the needs of this population.

Another limitation is the lack of a longitudinal measure of student performance. While our results may indicate initial immediate positive reactions, we are unable to determine from our available data whether these impacts will endure: whether they translate to improved performance over time. We suspect this might be possible if students found a high degree of congruence between a speaker's story and their own. The degree of congruence between stories of the speaker and the listener, as well as degrees of racial, gender, and age similarity, might be a powerful catalyst for positive academic and personal change. Exploring these relationships and the role of time might be more informative to the development of future interventions.

The result of this study may be helpful for administrators, faculty, and staff to understand effective strategies for engaging first-generation college students. The benefit to this approach is that it is less resource-intensive than some other existing programs, and thus may be an efficient option that can be deployed alongside other resource-based programs (specialized advising, etc.). At regional comprehensive universities, programs like this may align particularly well with institutional missions, especially toward the goal of supporting the success of all students within budget and time constraints. We believe our program works well because faculty and staff feel that they, and their stories, belong at our institution and contribute to the university's overall mission, and so our participants feel supported in sharing their stories with students. People at other schools and in programs that may wish to build on this work may start by explicitly recognizing the success of faculty and staff from first-generation, working-class, and financially insecure backgrounds as an important component of the institution's mission and overall success. People from these backgrounds may then be encouraged to self-identify and share their stories through institutional support. Validating an institution's FGWCFI faculty and staff validates its students as well.

We recognize that possible cuts to funding for higher education would likely impact programs that support first-generation students. Such cuts are likely to make it more difficult for FGWCFI students to succeed in college in a process that would exacerbate inequalities in student success. In such an environment, and especially at institutions with a mission to serve the public, explicitly supporting FGWCFI faculty and staff allows those faculty and staff members to share their stories, advocate for students from those backgrounds, and work as allies for each other and for their students.

We recommend that researchers continue to build on the results of our findings to include programs that build or grow students' sense of belonging. As we have shown here, validation seems to be an effective tool for both priming more positive views of the self and encouraging the development of social, cultural, and psychological capital. It is possible that developing these forms of capital, largely as a result of feeling validated, might invite even more positive self-views that shape and inform more distal goals. In other words, it would be important to know whether such an intervention impacts motivations around career planning and job preparation activity. With the increasing concern to improve circumstances for their

success, validation and story sharing may be a critical means by which colleges and universities effectively counsel and mentor students from first-generation, working-class, or financially insecure backgrounds.

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APPENDIX A: SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

- What did you learn from these stories?
- In what ways do these stories relate to your experiences?
- How has your class background influenced your life? What has been great about it? What has been hard about it?
- What support have you received and/or given to others around class issues?
- What would you like to see Bridgewater State University do about issues of class? How can you be a part of that effort?

APPENDIX B: SURVEY RESULTS

Table 1. Our Stories Survey Demographic Responses, n = 51	n	%
Class Standing		
First-year	26	50.9
Sophomore	4	7.8
Junior	10	19.6
Senior	11	21.6
Commuter	22	43.1
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	1	1.9
Black	7	13.7
Cape Verdean	5	9.8
Hispanic/Latino	6	11.8
White	38	74.5
First-Generation College Student, Self-Identification		
Yes	21	41.2
No	25	49.0
Unsure	5	9.8

Table 2. Our Stories Survey Reflection Responses, n = 51						
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Increased my awareness of how individuals from working-class and first-generation backgrounds often encounter unexpected difficulties in college	27	20	4	0	0
Helped me to make connections between my personal story and the stories of other individuals on campus and in different locations in the institution	24	22	5	0	0
Helped me to make connections between my personal story and my current or proposed major	17	23	9	2	0
Helped me to identify my expectations and goals for my college experience, major, and career outcomes to make the most of the opportunities available on campus	25	20	4	2	0
Inspired me to tell my own story	14	17	16	4	0
Asked only of last two programs, n = 30					
I feel confident in my ability to succeed as a student in this university.	15	11	2	2	0
I feel that my teachers and the staff understand the challenges going on in my life.	10	15	0	3	2
I feel like I belong to this institution.	10	12	4	3	1
I feel like I can manage difficulties one way or another.	10	18	2	0	0

Table 3. Our Stories Survey Additional Responses	n	%
What other types of events sponsored by the Class Beyond the Classroom would you want to attend? (Select all that apply), n = 51		
Workshops	20	39.2
Small group discussions	28	54.9
Pizza party with faculty interaction	28	54.9
More story events	39	76.5
After hearing the stories that were shared today, I feel (check all that apply), n = 30		
Empowered	14	46.7
Excited	10	33.3
Validated	4	13.3
Discouraged	0	0