“First-gens,” broadly defined as students whose parents did not graduate from a four-year American college, are forging a new path. At Harvard, this newness might lead to questions about belonging, identity, and ways to navigate in academia. Many Harvard students share these concerns, but for first-gen students these matters might have a greater weight and complexity. Below are some experiences that first-gen students commonly describe:

1. “There seems to be a set of unwritten rules about how to behave in academia and in college that I don’t know.”

2. “My parents got higher education in another country, but I am the first generation to attend a four-year American college. I feel as if I’m first-gen, but I feel illegitimate using that term when I know there are students whose parents didn’t go to college at all or whose families are financially strapped.”

3. “It’s hard to explain to my family the meaning of a liberal arts education. They wonder what a person does for a living after concentrating in Sociology – never mind Folklore and Mythology.”

4. “My entire life at Harvard – not only academics, but my extracurriculars and social life and personal time – is so different from the lives of people back home that I don’t know how to describe it to them. So I have stopped even trying. But, as a result, my interactions with them have become vague and superficial, and I feel as if no one back home knows me as the person I am now.”


6. “I try not to come across to people back home as elitist or prideful, but my father says he thinks I’ve gotten ‘too big for my britches.’ He seems disappointed in me, even angry with me.”

7. “I feel guilty for being at Harvard and for having so many resources available to me, especially when my family and other people back home have so much less.”

8. “I feel bad saying this, but sometimes I feel ashamed of my background and my family. At Harvard, I feel so unsophisticated, so naïve and unpolished. And my family seems even less sophisticated than me. I’m partly glad my parents can’t afford to come visit me because I’m afraid I would be embarrassed by them.”

9. “People keep saying ‘Go talk to someone,’ but I don’t know whom to trust or who might actually be helpful. Also I’m not sure whether I’m being presumptuous to ask for their time and help, and I’m not quite sure how to approach them or what exactly to say.”

10. “If I need academic help, it means I don’t belong here. I worry my teachers will think I’m not smart enough or haven’t tried hard enough. I worry that I will fail and will disappoint my family and community who are all so proud of me.”

11. “Money is a weird thing at Harvard. Some of my roommates seem rich. But I send money home to my family. My family hasn’t visited me at college because they can’t afford the cost of the travel or of the time off from work. I plan to work this summer at my old job at home – not have a glamorous unpaid internship. What do I say to my roommates when they all go out for dinner and I can’t afford to do that?”

12. “Sometimes I feel like I don’t have much to say because I haven’t had the experience other students have had (of, say, travel or summer homes or unpaid internships or other experiences my family could never afford). If I do say something, I feel as if I’m faking it, or I feel inferior to other students.”

On the following pages, we elaborate upon each of these experiences and suggest some things to consider trying as you find your way at Harvard.

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1 There are four other handouts in the “Am I the Only One Who...?” series, one each for Harvard freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. They are available in the Cranium Corner library of handouts in the BSC waiting room and online at bsc.harvard.edu.
1. “There seems to be a set of unwritten rules about how to behave in academia and in college that I don’t know.” You might find yourself wondering at the apparent ease with which other students interact with faculty or seem to just know how to navigate the system – e.g., how to find resources, internships, funding, or jobs. In families where members have graduated from a four-year college, children often grow up receiving, in explicit and implicit ways, an understanding of the way academia works and how they can make academia work for them. They also have passed along to them the confidence that one can approach authorities and institutions with a sense of competence and capability to work things out and get one’s needs met. This knowledge and confidence are often referred to as “cultural capital.” Students from families without this type of background sometimes feel at a loss about how to learn these things; they can feel as if they are behind from the start and that they somehow should have known all this information before arriving at college.

**Things to consider trying:**
- Remind yourself that you are not the only student at Harvard who doesn’t feel knowledgeable about these kinds of things and that your learning curve and experience of some of the basics will be steep, especially during your first couple of years at Harvard. But you’ll get there!
- Find a trusted friend or a Harvard resource, such as a Peer Advising Fellow (PAF), a proctor or House tutor, your resident dean, or your academic adviser (i.e., freshman adviser, sophomore adviser, or concentration adviser) with whom you can share your concerns.
- Give yourself a chance to actively learn how to go about finding your way. Try picking one thing you want to know more about. For example, how do I talk to a professor? Or, how do I find out about summer internships? Find out more by talking with your PAF, checking online, or talking with your academic adviser. Recognize that these are skills which can be learned.
- Reassure yourself that cultural capital comes in many forms. You have cultural capital, too, just about subcultures different from some of those at Harvard. Remember that Harvard chose you for your unique background and experience and that Harvard believes in you and the contributions you will make to the Harvard community. Consider how you might share your unique cultural capital with individual people you meet as well as with the broader Harvard community. Such sharing will not only contribute to others’ understanding but will enable you to feel more empowered and confident.

2. “My parents got higher education in another country, but I am the first generation to attend a four-year American college. I feel as if I’m first-gen, but I feel illegitimate using that term when I know there are students whose parents didn’t go to college at all or whose families are financially strapped.” First-gen students come from a variety of backgrounds. While many are the first in their family to attend college at all, some have parents who graduated from a college abroad or who attended some college in the U.S. While many come from families with very limited financial means, some come from families with average or above average income. All of these students tend to find that their parents’ unfamiliarity with the assumptions, policies, and practices of American colleges and universities leaves them feeling as if they are charting a new course solo, without the benefit of their family’s experience and guidance. Even students whose parents graduated from a four-year American college but who did not live in a residential college setting or who did not attend an Ivy League college or university can feel as if they are first-gen in some sense.

**Things to consider trying:**
- Recognize that you meet the common definition of a first-gen student and that first-gen students from various backgrounds report similar experiences of what it’s like to navigate in American academia and what it’s like to communicate with their families about their college experience.
- Make use of the resources that might be particularly useful to you as a first-gen student.

3. “It’s hard to explain to my family the meaning of a liberal arts education. They wonder what a person does for a living after concentrating in Sociology – never mind Folklore and Mythology.” First-gens often find

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3 Students whose parents attended or graduated from a college or university in a country other than the United States, students whose parents attended a four-year college or university in the U.S. but did not graduate from that institution, students whose parents attended or graduated from community college, and students whose parents have never attended college are all considered first-gen students in that their parents did not graduate from a four-year American college or university.
themselves explaining, even justifying, their choices to family members. This is a difficult task, especially when you yourself might not be feeling very confident in your responses. In addition, these explanations might extend to reassuring families about the value of internships or going abroad. It also might mean explaining all kinds of jargon: What’s the role of a proctor or dean? What is a “comp”? What is a response paper? What do students actually do in a “section”?

**Things to consider trying:**

- Be kind to yourself and your family members about everything you are all learning. Many times in our lives, by needing to explain things to others, we deepen our own understanding. In needing to articulate reasons for your choices or explain various aspects of Harvard, you’ll likely learn a lot and have to think things through yourself. That process might help you to recognize your own development and growth and to reflect upon and appreciate the choices you are making.
- Recognize that explaining your choices to others need not be the same as persuading or convincing them. While it is respectful of you to hear and respond to your family’s concerns, it is important for you to also respect yourself and your right to make choices and learn from your experience of those choices. You worked hard to get to Harvard, and some would argue that you have earned the right to study what you are passionate about. Your family members, out of fear about your financial security down the road, might urge you to “major in something practical” without appreciating that, regardless of your concentration, your Harvard academic experience can equip you to think deeply and to connect your knowledge to real-world issues. Beyond your academic experience, experiential and practical learning through extracurricular activities, volunteer work, lab experience, summer and term-time jobs, and internships also prepares you for work in the real world.
- Remember that learning how to navigate Harvard is a challenge for many students and their families.

4. “My entire life at Harvard – not only academics, but my extracurriculars and social life and personal time – is so different from the lives of people back home that I don’t know how to describe it to them. So I have stopped even trying. But, as a result, my interactions with them have become vague and superficial, and I feel as if no one back home knows me as the person I am now.” It is a challenge to convey a sense of your new day-to-day context and reality to people who still inhabit the context and reality you once shared with them. One first-gen student at Harvard described a process of growing increasingly distant from her mother. Before coming to college, the student had routinely talked with her mother about the dailyness of her life – letting her mother know what she had done that day; anticipating various plans and upcoming events; and sharing concerns, large and small, which were on her mind. But once she got to Harvard, the student stopped telling her mother the details of her of her day-to-day life because she assumed that it would be hard for her mother to imagine her daughter’s experiences given that they were so unlike her own.

**Things to consider trying:**

- Begin to talk about the details of your life even if it feels strange to do so. For that student who grew increasingly distant from her mother, eventually, the distance felt so unbearable to her that she decided she would try telling her mother more specifics about her life even if it meant she had to supply a lot of explanation and back story. She says her regret is that she didn’t start doing that sooner. “Even if it’s hard to describe, do it anyway,” is her advice to first-gen freshman. “Give the people close to you a chance to know how you and your life are changing. It’s worth it.”
- Accept the realities attendant to being, in effect or in reality, bicultural and bilingual. Some students say that, in their experience, it makes more sense to just accept that they have a home self and a Harvard self and not to try to bridge the two. It’s as if they are bicultural and bilingual: they switch codes when they move from one context to another. They accept the reality that they have passports from two very different worlds and experience radically different states of being in each. For some students, the reference to code-switching between languages is not a metaphor. Their parents and family members speak a primary or only language other than English. Students who speak with their family in that language say that the difference in language makes bridging one’s different worlds all the more challenging.
- Remind yourself that being bicultural and bilingual are strengths of yours. Your mind and spirit are well-equipped to approach life with a deep appreciation for different subcultures, different perspectives, different ways of making meaning, and you have a fluency and flexibility of mind that is valuable and admirable.
5. “Who am I? Where do I belong?” As noted in #4 above, first-gen students sometimes talk about feeling as if they are a different person at Harvard than at home. When you are home, you might try to avoid mentioning the name “Harvard,” with the result that you rarely talk about your Harvard experiences with friends and family at home. At Harvard, you might refrain from talking about your family because their lifestyle seems a world apart from that of people here. The separation between your Harvard self and your home self can leave you feeling incomplete and inauthentic whether you are home or on campus.

Things to consider trying:

- Try to remember that you are striving to figure out who you are and to be true to who you are. The college years are known for profound, sometimes unsettling, experiences of identity change as we work to discover new aspects of ourselves and our experience and to live a life that feels true to who we are and what we deeply value. Give yourself a chance to work through these questions, even if it means you don’t always have the answers.

- Know that we all sometimes feel dissonance within ourselves. A good course of action is to ask yourself: What might I wish to change? What would I prefer to keep the same? What seems to be just intrinsic to who I am? Find compatriots or trusted people in your life with whom you can share these important questions. As difficult as it can be to grapple with basic questions of identity – especially when it can seem as if others, on the face of it, are so secure in theirs – trust that your exploration during these crucial years of self-development will ultimately leave you feeling more confident in your sense of self and more appreciative of your own and others’ complexity.

6. “I try not to come across to people back home as elitist or prideful, but my father says I’ve gotten ‘too big for my britches.’ He seems disappointed in me, even angry with me.” The reality is that as you grow and develop and encounter new people and new experiences, you change. You are not quite the same as you were before. Sometimes people in your life feel threatened by rather than curious about those changes. They might envy you for the opportunities you are having that they wish they had had. They might fear that, as your sense of possibility expands, you will judge them as inadequate, and that fear leaves them with a sense of shame, which in turn can lead to rage and an effort to shame you – as if to say, “How dare you make me feel small! Shame on you!” They might long for stability, for nothing to change, so that they do not have to experience a sense of doubt or uncertainty or insecurity and the anxiety attendant to those feelings. In the face of such powerful and gripping emotions, they might go on the attack, judging all change they perceive in you as bad and judging you as bad for having changed. Sometimes, if you can extend curiosity and kindness and acknowledge your own vulnerability, someone will soften a bit, and another kind of conversation becomes possible.

Things to consider trying:

- Acknowledge change without presuming change is bad: “I suppose I have changed. I would hope for the better, not the worse. Can you say what you notice about me that seems different?”

- Greet judgment with humility and gratitude: “I’m sorry if I seem prideful. I don’t want to be that way. In fact, mostly, I feel just plain thankful. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t count my blessings. I hope you know how grateful I am for all that you do and all that you are.”

- Offer a reframing: “I’m sorry if I’m coming across as prideful. I admit I am excited by the opportunities I have been offered. I wonder if my excitement somehow comes across as my being arrogant or superior.”

- Greet judgment with compassion and curiosity: “I get the sense you are missing something about how I used to me. Can you say what that is? Have you yourself ever gone through a season of change in your own life? What was that like for you? How did other people respond to that?”

- Greet judgment with reassurance and love: “I probably don’t say often enough and clearly enough how much I love you and how much I miss you.”

- Greet judgment with humor: Humor depends so much on context – the particular relationship you have with a family member and the particular moment in which you are with them, so it is hard to suggest an example of something that would generally be experienced as playful or ironic around a sensitive matter. Trust that you know how humor works in your relationships and that you can sense whether it’s worth a try.

- Greet judgment with acknowledgment of your own vulnerability: “Wow, that’s so interesting that I come across that way to you because, inside, I feel so scared that I’m not good enough and so envious of students I meet who seem so much more confident and competent than I feel.”

- If, despite your goodwill and your good faith efforts to respond with respect and compassion, someone’s judgment persists or turns mean – i.e., if their mind or heart is closed, or if their effort is to...
shame or diminish you – accept that there might be a limit to what you can do to mend the relationship at this moment in time. Don’t blame yourself. Allow yourself to limit your exposure to that sort of treatment. No one deserves meanness.

7. “I feel guilty for being at Harvard and for having so many resources available to me, especially when my family and other people back home have so much less.” Those first-gen students who come from families with very limited financial resources say that they feel an almost unbearable sense of bounty and gratitude for the wealth of riches they experience at Harvard. While students from more well-resourced backgrounds might complain about the quality of the dining hall food and the dorm rooms, students from less well-resourced backgrounds might find that they have never had such fine cuisine or such luxurious accommodations. Beyond that, the range and caliber of courses, the vast array of extracurricular activities, the opportunities for research and travel (and the funding opportunities available to support those experiences) – such blessings are beyond what many first-gen students have ever imagined for themselves. They report a sort of guilt about partaking of such bounty. Dare they enjoy such luxury when people back home struggle with deprivation? That sort of guilt can be preoccupying and distracting as students are left torn about whether they can let themselves accept such abundance.

Some students also experience a version of “gratitude fatigue,” a sense that even when they might benefit from a form of help or support Harvard offers them, they ought not to pursue it or accept it because they have already received so much. Like someone at an extravagant birthday party who feels bad about unwrapping and accepting yet another present when he or she has already received so many, they experience “an embarrassment of riches” vis a vis those who are bestowing so much upon them.

**Things to consider trying:**

♦ Remember that some guilt is guilt worth bearing and is not an indication that what you are doing is wrong and ought to be stopped. Guilt is an emotion that can signal us not to do something that could create harm or inconvenience for someone (e.g., if we and our passengers are able-bodied, we’d feel guilt if we seriously considered parking a car in a handicapped parking space). Guilt can also signal us to do something active out of a sense of fairness or reciprocity or gratitude (e.g., guilt can motivate us to finally write a belated thank-you note to someone who did something nice for us). The guilt associated with letting yourself partake of the luxuries of Harvard is arguably of this latter sort. You can bear profound guilt in part by transforming it into profound gratitude, to a deep and lived appreciation of the gifts you have been given, gifts you might not so much pay back as pay forward in the way you extend them to others through the way you live your life.

♦ Regard your guilt as an indication of your humility and integrity. And consider that humility and integrity are virtues in which you might, paradoxically, take some pride. At the inaugural meeting of an organization of first-gen students, Stephen Lassonde, Harvard’s Dean of Student Life, urged the students to “hold onto your humility.” *Humility* comes from the Latin root *humus*, meaning “ground.” In an age in which we see many instances of entitlement and self-importance, the virtue of being grounded and down to earth is arguably in too short supply. *Integrity* comes from the Latin root *integer*, meaning “whole.” In contrast to self-featuring or self-serving behavior, an act of integrity derives from regarding oneself and the choices one makes in relation to a larger whole, in the service of something greater than the self.

♦ Remember that it is a gift to others to let yourself receive from them. Consider that, just as you might enjoy the experience of giving to others, others might enjoy giving to you. We can inadvertently diminish or dishonor someone by not accepting their gift with graciousness and gratitude: we can dignify them by offering a heartfelt “Thank you.”

8. “I feel bad saying this, but sometimes I feel ashamed of my background and my family. At Harvard, I feel so unsophisticated, so naïve and unpolished. And my family seems even less sophisticated than me. I’m partly glad my parents can’t afford to come visit me because I’m afraid I would be embarrassed by them.” Shame is an especially powerful and uncomfortable emotion, one you might understandably try to avoid at all costs. Shame can lead you to hide so as not to risk being exposed as lacking. If you fear that your family members might be a source of additional exposure, shame, and embarrassment for you, you might find yourself wanting to hide them from your friends and acquaintances.

**Things to consider trying:**

♦ Accept your feelings as natural and understandable. Disparaging yourself for feeling ashamed will only give you an additional source of shame.
If your family does plan to visit, talk with your close friends ahead of time to let them know your concerns. Good friends will be curious and supportive. They will want to meet the people who helped make you who you are, and they will want to treat them with respect and kindness.

If your family plans to visit you, ask them if there is anything they would like to know or ask in anticipation of their visit. The idea is not to offer them a full-scale briefing session on Harvard but just to open the door to conversation. Your family members might have their own concerns about feeling out-of-place or inadequate in the context of Harvard.

Trust that you are not alone in feeling ashamed of or embarrassed by family members. Even students who are not first-gen and whose families have had plenty of education and other resources can feel embarrassed by their families.

Recognize what it is about your family that you do value and that seems part and parcel of their (and your) background. Perhaps they are grateful for simple pleasures and basic blessings and have what someone once called “a low wonder threshold” and a great capacity for awe. Perhaps they have little pretense and readily put others at ease with their authenticity and hospitality. Perhaps they have a sense of humility and generosity and a willingness to serve. Perhaps they have a strong work ethic, a practical intelligence, and a deep sense of pride in work well done.

“People keep saying ‘Go talk to someone,’ but I don’t know whom to trust or who might actually be helpful. Also I’m not sure whether I’m being presumptuous to ask for their time and help, and I’m not quite sure how to approach them or what exactly to say.” Harvard has many resources, which is great, but sometimes it can be hard to choose which person or people to talk to. More fundamentally, you might wonder what good could come from just talking, especially with someone who doesn’t know you or doesn’t know you well. You might be inclined to turn to family and friends from home but then find that, while they want to be supportive, they don’t feel that they can be helpful to you about Harvard things. As a result, you might find yourself refraining from sharing your struggles with people at home to spare them that feeling of helplessness.

Harvard students – and perhaps first-generation students in particular – are typically resourceful people in two senses but sometimes less resourceful in a third. They have a lot of internal resources, or grit, and they are accustomed to digging deep and doing what needs to be done; that sort of self-reliance is a strength. First-gen students also tend to be resourceful in a second sense in that they know how to make a little (money, help, encouragement, etc.) go a long way. One first-gen student said, “Give me a crumb, I’ll treat it like a cake.” Both of these forms of resourcefulness can appropriately be a source of pride.

But some first-gen students are not resourceful in a third sense, which is in being able to seek out and use the bountiful interpersonal and institutional resources at a place like Harvard. If your experience to date has not exposed you to certain worlds of opportunity and support, it is understandable that you might not know that certain avenues of possibility even exist much less where they could lead much less that you are someone who is worthy of such opportunities and supports and has the agency to avail yourself of those resources.

It can be a new and unsettling experience to even feel the need to seek help from a professor or teaching fellow in your efforts with a paper or problem set, or to ask for financial assistance for something you need, or to apply for funding for some opportunity you want to pursue, or to seek consultation about what sort of research or travel or internship opportunities could benefit your learning and development. You might feel a bit intimidated or cautious about approaching someone; making that first move could feel daunting. You might also wonder if your particular question or request is worthy enough of someone’s attention or time or concern. And you might wonder how to approach someone and what actual words to use when addressing them, especially if you yourself are still struggling to articulate your concern or question.

Using interpersonal and institutional resources is not a sign of inadequacy or weakness or an indication that you have lost your self-reliance and resourcefulness. We necessarily need to rely upon self and others. Being self-reliant includes relying upon ourselves to seek and use the resources others can offer us. Remember: resourceful students use the resources!

Things to consider trying:

- You might want to create a “team” of people who can talk to you about different issues: a PAF might be the best person to talk with about fitting in socially, while your academic adviser might be the best person to talk with about developing new study skills. Other team members might include your proctor (or House tutor), a professor, an academic counselor from the Bureau of Study Counsel, a mentor through the First-Generation Harvard Alumni Mentoring Program, or your roommates and
blockmates. Keep in mind that even if someone does not know the answer to your question, he or she can help put you in touch with someone who might. Or, like family members or old friends, that person can be supportive just through his or her belief in you. Though talking might not seem like you’re “doing” something, it gives you a chance to air your concerns and make them feel more manageable.

- With a team, you can consult with one of your more approachable team members to consider together how you might approach a person or institution that feels less readily approachable to you.
- Encourage yourself to talk to someone by remembering that many Harvard students seek out people to talk about all kinds of experiences and concerns. Remember too that people in designated helping roles at Harvard have experience talking with students from a variety of backgrounds.
- Appreciate that developing a healthy sense of entitlement to seek and use resources might be one of your growing edges in college. Sometimes our humility and our respect for others’ time and our gratitude for so much that has already been given can keep us from feeling as if we have a right to ask for things that could be helpful to us. While humility, respect, and gratitude are strengths worth preserving and cultivating, a sense of worthiness and agency – “I am worth it” and “I can do this” – are also strengths worth cultivating.
- Remember that many of the College resources that will be useful to you as a first-gen student will not be specifically designated as “first-gen resources.” What is useful for first-gen students is typically useful for many other students as well (i.e., academic counseling about student life and learning; peer tutoring; workshops on time management, speaking up in class, and heading home for the holidays; and sessions on investigating summer opportunities and exploring career paths).

10. “If I need academic help, it means I don’t belong here. I worry my teachers will think I’m not smart enough or haven’t tried hard enough. I worry that I will fail and will disappoint my family and community who are all so proud of me.” Many students arrive at Harvard having never needed academic help or support from teachers or other authority figures. Finding yourself in need of academic support can be a blow to your confidence.

**Things to consider trying:**
- At Harvard, getting help is *not* a strike against you. It’s actually considered a sign of resourcefulness. Courses provide many types of support to help students find the one that suits them the best. The College’s tutoring program, through the Bureau of Study Counsel, is another way to receive academic assistance; tutoring is considered private student information (the course instructors and teaching fellows and assistants do not know who receives tutoring), and it is affordable (in an effort to make tutoring within financial reach of all students, the College subsidizes tutoring costs for all students and offers additional financial support to students on financial aid). Try out various resources to see which one suits you the best.
- Reassure yourself that *many* students at Harvard seek advice and assistance for a range of personal and academic reasons – it’s not a sign of failure or imminent disaster.
- It’s a heavy weight to feel the pressure of your own and others’ expectations for your success. Seeking assistance is one of the best ways to ease this burden and to rediscover your confidence in your abilities.

11. “Money is a weird thing at Harvard. Some of my roommates seem rich. But I send money home to my family. My family hasn’t visited me at college because they can’t afford the cost of the travel or of the time off from work. I plan to work this summer at my old job at home – not have a glamorous unpaid internship. What do I say to my roommates when they all go out for dinner and I can’t afford to do that?” Harvard students come from a wide range of economic backgrounds. This diversity is an essential part of our community. Respecting these differences is also an essential part of living with each other. But situations do arise that leave students feeling ashamed or silenced. Sometimes things happen which are meant to be good things, like invitations from your roommates to go out for dinner, but which could leave you feeling uncomfortable.

**Things to consider trying:**
- Your financial situation is a private concern, but not saying anything presents its own challenges. Consider whether there’s one person in the group whom you can entrust with knowing that you just can’t afford to go out for dinner. Practice some responses with this person. For example, “I’m afraid that I don’t have extra money to go out to dinner. Can we go to Annenberg instead?” or “Dinner out is a budget-breaker for me. How about going out for coffee after dinner?”
Check with the Financial Aid Office to see if you are eligible for work-study funding (a government program which covers a large share of your wages, which means that employers might hire you when they otherwise could not afford to do so). Regardless of whether you qualify for work-study funding, consider finding a job and working enough to give yourself some spending money for items and experiences you might really appreciate.

If you have particular expenses for you which could use additional financial support – an extra trip home due to illness or death in the family; books, course packs, or other course materials that are over budget for you; travel or a summer program with an educational purpose – check with the Financial Aid Office to see if there is additional financial help available in the form of extra grant aid or a loan.

12. “Sometimes I feel like I don’t have much to say because I haven’t had the experience other students have had (of, say, travel or summer homes or unpaid internships or other experiences my family could never afford). If I do say something, I feel as if I’m faking it, or I feel inferior to other students.” Sometimes, when people feel different, they assume that they are deficient. The challenge is to accept difference without judging it and to learn from other people’s experience without diminishing your own.

Things to consider trying:

- See comments about “cultural capital” under point #1.
- One approach to situations in which we feel awkward or uncertain of how to participate is to let ourselves assume the role of an anthropologist, a participant-observer who is curious to learn about a new culture by trying to become a part of it while taking careful note of one’s experience of it.
- Don’t abandon yourself: remember that you have had other, different, life experiences of your own. They might not seem fancy or flashy, but they are experiences of value and interest in their own right. Trust that other students and the Harvard community more broadly can learn a great deal from you and your life experiences.

We realize this handout captures only some of the complexity of experiences first-generation students might have. We at the Bureau of Study Counsel encourage you to find someone to talk to about your particular experiences (see point #9 above!).

Bureau of Study Counsel academic counselors are available to consult with you about any of these topics or other things that might be on your mind. Call 617-495-2581 or stop by at 5 Linden Street to find a time to meet with someone.

October 2014, July 2015, October 2016