



## First-Generation Student Experiences in Higher Education: Counterstories

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*Book Review:*

## **First-Generation Student Experiences in Higher Education: Counterstories**

by Carl E. James and Leanne E. Taylor  
New York: Routledge, 2022. Pages: 1-188.  
ISBN: 9780367547165 (hardcover)

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Post-secondary education, particularly university, is often upheld as a meritocratic pathway to social mobility. For first-generation university students, higher education can offer both prestige and economic opportunities that would otherwise be out of reach. In *First-Generation Student Experiences in Higher Education*, authors James and Taylor highlight the accomplishments and struggles of a group of eight first-generation university students in Toronto, Canada, as they navigated the university and the access program in which they participated.

Challenging the notions of colour-blind equality in post-secondary education, this text problematizes the view of merit as the deciding factor in academic achievement. The counterstories told serve to challenge stereotypes about racialized and marginalized/migrant students as uninterested in or incompatible within university culture. Additionally, these snapshots into the lives of first-generation students can help those in post-secondary education understand the hurdles that students face in achieving their academic dreams, and how educators can support student success. James and Taylor argue just that when they write, “It is through these stories that they [the students in the project] wish us to know them, understand their aspirations, and appreciate the ways they negotiated university” (p. XIV). The book is organized around each student’s story, with each chapter highlighting a different student’s experience. Each narrative highlights themes touched upon by the amply referenced literature, and examines commonalities and differences between each students’ experiences.

The preface and introduction give readers a background to the access program, “Bridging the Solitudes,” at York University, on which the book is based, as well as orienting the reader to the ideas and approaches in both the book and the larger program. James and Taylor discuss their

perspectives about this research, including how they conceptualize first-generation students, their methodology for the project, and the theoretical frameworks that guide their examination. With a strong emphasis on critical theory, the authors highlight the importance of counterstories to question popular discourses about marginalized students in education, and present them, not as proof of deficiency, but rather, as a means to show the resilience, grit, and perseverance these young people bring with them from their communities into the institution. Chapters two through nine of the book spotlight the stories of eight participants in the bridging program. They were obtained through a combination of journal entries, application essays, recorded conversations, and recent follow-up contact with the participants. Taken together, the vignettes help to paint a picture about the motivations of these students to attend university, as well as the difficulties they faced in realizing these educational aspirations.

When discussing their motivations for attending university, and remaining there through difficult times, many of the students featured talked about their families, and particularly their parents. Some felt, as beneficiaries of their parents' migration struggle, that university was an expected aspect of fulfilling their parents' dreams of upward social mobility. This expectation is exemplified in Amy's story, when she discusses her parents' pride in her attending university, but disappointment that it was not a more prestigious university. Though York and its bridging program provided more financial and social support than she would have found elsewhere, James and Taylor note how "going to that university would have represented Amy's high achievement, and also, the family's success" (p. 101). For these students, university is not simply about personal success, but about bringing meaning to the sacrifices their families made when immigrating to Canada.

A well-written and cogent text, this book provides insight into the lived experiences of an under-studied population. Taylor and James offer a glimpse into the realities of first-generation students, and potential avenues for greater post-secondary supports. There is considerable value here for the scholar looking to reframe a complacent perspective. The evidence in the stories presented encourages the reader to understand many of the complexities of immigrant experience. Contexts, such as work or family care, managing their 'old-world' culture, burgeoning identity formation, navigating institutional bureaucracy, and coping with experiences of stereotyping within the university are covered using a grounding in both theory and the authentic voices of the students themselves.

Though first-generation students may not be attending or graduating from university at comparable rates to their peers, they certainly understand the value of education. As Kofi says in emphasising the life possibilities opened up by a university degree, "education will get you to the station" (p. 16). Scholars can use this text to better understand the tangible and invisible barriers that first-generation students face in obtaining post-secondary education. Critically, this text challenges the idea that first-generation students are uninterested or unfit for post-secondary studies, and brings to the fore the systemic barriers put upon them by Canadian institutions. Scholars can use this information to not only better support these students in their classrooms, but also to build university infrastructures that can support students, including programs like "Bridging the Solitude."

This book is a valuable resource for those seeking to understand the low rates of academic achievement for migrant youth in Canada. The eight students featured, some of whom graduated and some who did not, all faced intense barriers to achieving academic success. For these students, this proved much more complex than merely good grades. It involved their ability to juggle multiple worlds and expectations. Discrimination based on race and country of origin

further compounds the ability of second-generation students to feel a sense of belonging at post-secondary institutions, and further exacerbates academic struggles.

This book offers insights into the hopes, dreams, and motivations of first-generation students in Canada, as they attempt to navigate Eurocentric institutions that claim to be based in principles of equity and meritocracy. These eight stories also illustrate the reality that motivation and determination are not always enough to overcome systemic barriers. This book, and the program on which it is based, elucidates the challenges this group of students face during university, and the potential interventions to be taken by educators seeking to support the success of these students. These counterstories provide a glimpse into the lived experiences of first-generation university students and in doing so, invite those who work with them to support the success of these young people achieving their educational aspirations.

James and Taylor offer a text that challenges beliefs of post-secondary institutions in Canada as meritocratic and accessible. Beyond simply accepting students into their programs, universities have a role to play in ensuring success for students from historically marginalized communities. Universities must actively work to create, and fund supports for these students for the entirety of their degrees.

### Author Bio

**Anna Lippman** is a third generation Ashkenzi Jewish migrant on Turtle Island. She is a PhD student in the Sociology department at York University. Anna organizes with several groups in Toronto including Showing Up for Racial Justice and Independent Jewish Voices.

### Reference

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