

Do first-gen college grads face bias in the job market?

July 24 2023, by Lee Simmons



Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Peter Belmi, who earned his Ph.D. at Stanford Graduate School of Business in 2015, was the first in his family to attend college. Today he's a professor at the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business.

Yet when some of his graduating students who were also "first-gens" asked if they should mention that fact in their job applications, Belmi was hesitant.

He talked it over with several colleagues—including his former doctoral adviser at Stanford, Margaret Neale—and the group agreed that it could go either way. Hiring managers might see it as a plus, but some research suggested that the first-gen label might carry a stigma.

"On one hand," says Neale, a professor emerita of organizational behavior at Stanford GSB, "being first-generation fits the old Horatio Alger narrative that Americans love: the gritty underdog who overcomes hardships and bootstraps themselves up to success. It takes an exceptional person to do that."

But, according to Neale, others might believe that one's class background leaves a mark. These [young people](#) may have grown up without the socializing influence of any college-educated role models. Perhaps their schools were under-resourced, or they didn't have a good study situation at home.

"Basically, it's a deficit mindset," Neale says of this perspective. "It's like, here are all things they lack, compared to other applicants—rather than focusing on the unique strengths that enabled them to beat the odds."

To find out which view prevailed, Belmi and Neale, along with Melissa Thomas-Hunt, professor at the Darden School, and behavioral scientist Kelly Raz, created a fictitious résumé and a cover letter that either mentioned the applicant's first-gen status or did not. They then sent out this candidate's materials in response to 1,785 entry-level job postings.

The first-gen applications were significantly less successful, receiving

26% fewer callbacks for an interview than the group that didn't disclose the candidate's background. "These initial results suggested that revealing your first-gen status probably isn't a good idea," Neale says. "But then the question was, why is that?"

The psychology of gatekeepers

As anyone who's applied for a job knows, employers never tell you why that cover letter you sweated over didn't make the cut. In this study, the researchers had their suspicions—perhaps hiring managers felt that mentioning first-gen status was inappropriate or seemed like special pleading. But they couldn't rule out other explanations.

To peer into the minds of these gatekeepers, the team next surveyed 285 hiring managers on their beliefs about the influence of class background. On a scale of 1 to 7, they were asked how strongly they agreed with statements like "The capabilities of people can, to a large degree, be traced back to their social origin."

They found that a majority of the managers believed/felt that class shapes people's traits and abilities. Sixty-two percent agreed that "even when individuals have left their original social environment, their behavior is still strongly determined by their social origin."

On average, those surveyed agreed that "generally, students from lower socioeconomic-status backgrounds are not as well equipped to succeed in business." These findings, says Neale, call into question the assumption that education is a great equalizer and engine of mobility.

Shifting mindsets

The researchers wondered if there was an intervention that might

mitigate the negative first-gen effect. They had traced the bias, at least in part, to a deficit mindset in people who were screening applicants.

"What we thought was, maybe you could devise an intervention to shift that mindset," Neale says. "Something that employers could use to facilitate inclusion."

They tested that idea in two more studies, using a large sample of 1,250 people. These were not hiring managers but college-educated, employed individuals from the general population. (Neale says prior research showed that employment gatekeepers share the same evaluation biases as the average person, so the results ought to be transferrable.)

Each was given an application from the fictitious first-gen graduate and asked to imagine they were hiring a team for a critical business opportunity. This time the researchers manipulated the decision-makers' frame of reference, prompting them to focus either on shortcomings or strengths that might result from a first-generation student's experience.

In one study, they suggested particular traits that first-gens would have needed to navigate four years of college—like courage, determination, resourcefulness, adaptability, resilience, and problem-solving skills. In the other, they asked the study participants to identify for themselves what those strengths might be.

Remarkably, both these simple interventions worked. Among those with a focus on shortcomings, only 26% said they would consider the first-gen candidate and the group expressed strong doubt that the applicant would have the necessary competence. Among those primed with a focus on strengths, 47%—nearly twice as many—said they would explore a job offer with the candidate. The research has been published in the journal *Organization Science*.

Neale says this would be easy to implement in a business

environment/setting. "It didn't involve diversity training sessions or lectures on implicit bias; just a few suggestions on how to come at their assessment from a different direction. By nudging their mindset, participants were much more receptive to hiring first-gen graduates," she says, "so they were more able to appreciate the strengths that first-gen candidates could bring to an employer."

Telling their own story

In today's turbulent world, companies need access to a wide variety of perspectives. "You want folks who, because of their backgrounds, can look at a situation and see different things," Neale says. "Race and gender are crucial, but we should also think about diversity more broadly to include differing college majors, ages, career paths, and so on. First-gen is one of those things."

That said, it's crucial to approach diversity in the right way. "In our work and that of others, we're learning that trying to combat inequality by focusing on the disadvantages that people have faced can be counterproductive," she says. "It encourages that deficit mindset, a lens of less-than that can facilitate biases."

She points to how schools, including Stanford, have tried to help first-gen students with special programs. "While these programs have proved beneficial, focusing only on the remedial side reinforces this deficit mindset. Emphasizing the skills and abilities that these folks clearly have demonstrated can change how we think about their current and future potential."

The bigger lesson from this research, Neale says, is that we all need to be "more intentional in how we consider the strengths and weaknesses of those around us." We might start, she says, by listening to how Belmi's first-gen students saw themselves.

When Belmi polled them before starting this research, a majority wanted to share their first-gen status with prospective employers. They had fought through real challenges and succeeded, becoming the first in their families to receive a college diploma. "They wanted to tell their story in their [job applications](#) because they were proud of what they'd done," Neale says. "They felt their accomplishments showed special qualities they could bring to the table."

More information: Peter Belmi et al, The Consequences of Revealing First-Generational Status, *Organization Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.1287/orsc.2023.1682](#)

Provided by Stanford University

Citation: Do first-gen college grads face bias in the job market? (2023, July 24) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-07-first-gen-college-grads-bias-job.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.