A4. The Life and Times of a First-Generation College Student

Introduction
Gone are the days when college was only for the rich and privileged. With so many colleges to choose from and with financial aid and scholarships available, nearly anyone with the desire, preparation and fortitude can earn a college degree. In this lesson, students read and discuss a newspaper article about real-life people who overcame tremendous obstacles and challenges and successfully graduated from college. All the students profiled were first-generation college students – the first in their families to attend college, or to graduate from a four-year college or university.

In this lesson, students will read and discuss the profiles of first-generation college students, and then interview and write a short biography of someone they know who is a college student or college graduate.

Learning Goals
• To understand the steps that low-income, first-generation students took to graduate from college, despite great odds.
• To reinforce that students can attend college if they make the right decisions and carefully plan for the future.
• To recognize that there are students like themselves who are successful college graduates.
• To practice close reading of text.
• To develop probing interview questions and to conduct an interview.
• To write a short biography.

Target Audience
Students in grades 8 through 12.

Timing
45–60 minutes, plus homework.

Materials Needed
• Handout: Trailblazing Graduates, San Francisco Chronicle
• (Optional) Handout: Role-Plays on the Life of a College Student

Activities
1. (5 minutes) Start the lesson by asking students what issues they think students face throughout their college experiences, such as:
   a. “What issues do college students face in their first year?”
   b. “What issues may arise throughout a student’s entire college experience, both good and bad?”

2. (5 minutes) Encourage a number of responses, and get students warmed up to the idea that the class will be talking about the challenges that students can successfully overcome while attending college.

3. (10–15 minutes) Pass out the article Trailblazing Graduates. Have students quietly read the article in class (or alternatively, read aloud in pairs or triads). Encourage the student to do a close-read of the text and compare and contrast the three women profiled in the article; that is, what are the similarities and differences of each student profiled?

4. (10–15 minutes) After all students have read the article, lead a class discussion. Before the discussion begins, encourage the students to take notes. Discussion questions:
   • What or who inspired the students to go to college?
   • What did these students have in common prior to enrolling in college?
   • What similar experiences did they share while they were enrolled in college?
   • What challenges did they face once they got to college?
   • Did they overcome the challenges? How?
   • How have their college educations poised these students for success?
Homework assignment: Biography of a College Student or College Graduate

Instruct students to find someone they know or whom they have met who is either a current college student or a college graduate to interview. Students should ask at least 10 questions about their subject’s life and college experiences. For example: What was the subject’s life like before going to college? How was the transition between high school and college? Was it hard or easy? Why? What helped the subject succeed? Was there a person who was influential?

Optional: Divide the students into small groups and have them make a list of the potential interview questions.

Each student will write a two-to-four-page biography on the person interviewed. Help students structure the biography with the following instructions: Start with a description of the person. Who is the subject? What does the subject look like? How does the person act? What does he or she do? Then discuss some of the subject’s life experiences. Describe personal choices made and actions taken that got the subject to where he or she is today. Ask students to detail the qualities that the interview subject has that the student would like to emulate and what similar steps could be taken.

Optional: Once the homework is completed, have students read their biographies aloud to the rest of the class.

If students cannot find someone they know to interview, identify possible subjects for them, such as other teachers, advisors, social workers, health-care professionals, ministers, etc. Alternatively, contact a student organization or club at a local college and invite a small group of students to come to class for a group interview. Then have each student write a biography on one of the college students.

Extensions
- Conduct a role-play on the Life of a College Student. Instructions follow.
- Write a Personal Letter: Tell students to “Write an encouraging letter to yourself for your first year of college, or a congratulatory letter on your graduation day from college.” In three to five paragraphs students should give themselves advice and support to overcome the challenges they foresee themselves facing in the freshman year. If they choose the second option, they should explain why graduating from college is important and why they should be proud of their achievement, and remind themselves of the dreams that a college education will help them realize. Remind them to use correct formatting for a personal letter (e.g., neatly written, dated, and signed, with no errors in grammar or spelling).
- Write a critique of one of the stories or profiles listed in the bibliography.
- Invite a panel of college students to class to talk about their life experiences.

References
For other articles and stories on the first-generation college student experience, see:

STANDARDS FOR THE ENGLISH/ LANGUAGE ARTS
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Reading Association
www.ncte.org/about/over/standards/

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the work place; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

12. Students use spoken, written and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). Writing Type: Problem Solution Essay

CURRICULUM AND SKILL STANDARDS
The hopes and dreams of generations sit on the shoulders of most college graduates. For those who are the first-generation grads — the sons and daughters of uneducated farmworkers, factory laborers and maids — it can be the first real chance at a better life for generations to come.

“They are taking a step, but that step is really opening a path for the entire family,” said Harvard Professor Marcelo Suarez-Orozco. “The most fundamental issue is that there is an amplifier effect here, so that for each kid who is the first in his or her family to graduate from college, it acts as a very powerful motivator for future generations.”

Letitia Henderson, 22, who grew up in housing projects infested with drugs and gun violence, graduated this year from UC Berkeley with a double major in African American studies and social welfare.

Ute Prince, 41, a divorced mother raised in rural Germany, had to quit school when she was 16 because her parents were so poor they could no longer “afford to feed another mouth.” She earned her diploma this month from San Francisco State University, and was chosen as the single liberal studies student, out of 372 graduates, to receive an academic hood.

Juana Reynoza’s parents, immigrants from Mexico with just sixth-grade educations and limited English skills, could not help her with her homework. But they pushed her to do well in school, asking her, “Do you want to work in the fields or do you want to work in an office?” Reynoza, 24, graduated this month from Sonoma State University.

First-generation college students overcome tremendous financial disadvantages, as well as social and cultural barriers that discourage them from attending college, yet they often emerge successful as class leaders.

Henderson’s mother had her at just 17, quitting high school and struggling to make ends meet on welfare. The single-parent family, which grew to include three children, moved every few years. Until the seventh grade, Henderson was more interested in hanging out with friends than doing schoolwork. She had a C-minus grade point average. But one night, one of her friends came over and insisted on studying for a science test instead of listening to music. Henderson pulled out her books, too. The next day, she got her first C-plus. It felt good, she said. By the end of the eighth grade, she had a B-plus average.

Although Henderson wanted to focus on academics, it was difficult with all the distractions at McClymonds High School in West Oakland, one of the lowest performing high schools in the state. The school’s facilities were deteriorating and students had to deal with frequent violence.

“You had to be careful which bus stop you got off at to go to school because a gunfight could break out,” she said.

In her own neighborhood, Henderson had to walk by drug dealers to get to her front door and study to the noise of her neighbors’ domestic disputes.

But her mother and her grandmothers, both from sharecropper families in the south, encouraged her to focus on school, hoping that she could break out of the negative environment.

A dynamic young woman, Henderson was class president all four years of high school and a cheerleader. She was also a leader outside school in mock government programs and at Alameda County Youth Court, where high school students serve as the lawyers, prosecutors and jurors, handing down real punishments. She also had a job to help make ends meet.

Despite her school’s disadvantages, Henderson found strong support among teachers at McClymonds, who helped guide her through the college admission process and scholarship applications.

She got into UC Berkeley the first year after race-based admissions were eliminated.
“It didn’t really hit me until I attended ‘Cal Day’ (orientation) and I got my T-shirt and my Cal bear paw painted on my cheek and I was like, ‘Oh, my God, I’m really going to be going to Berkeley,” said Henderson.

When she saw the comment, “not ready to be graded” on her first English essay, she was devastated.

“That was really intimidating for me,” she said. “I started putting in mad time, reading and writing and revising into the wee hours of the night and getting input from my instructor.”

She joined a sorority, began tutoring in West Oakland schools and became a leader in the Black Recruitment and Retention Center and the National Council of Negro Women.

Now, amazed to be walking across the graduation stage, she plans to take a breather from school and work for a year at a chemical dependency center before applying to graduate schools for a joint master’s of social work and law program.

“I’m a girl who loves options. I have two majors, and I thought that two professional degrees would help,” Henderson said.

Ute Prince, who was born and raised in Rheinland-Palatinate, Germany, thought her options had ended when her parents said she didn’t need an education because she was just going to get married anyway. “At that time in a rural area, it was not seen to be important for a young woman to have a college degree,” said Prince.

She started working at a department store and later got a civil servant’s job. Still, although her parents had not attended college, she always dreamed of getting a degree.

After marrying an American serviceman and moving to the United States, she got a GED. In 1996, after she and her husband divorced, she enrolled at Skyline College, later transferring to San Francisco State University.

She struggled to make time for studying while caring for her two daughters, Melissa, 16, and Randilyn, 10. She was volunteering at their elementary school, tutoring other students and working as a teaching assistant at San Francisco State.

“I wanted to be a teacher. I’m almost 42, and I’m finally getting there,” said Prince, who got her diploma Saturday. She is enrolled in a teacher-credentialing program.

She is already preparing for a second generation of college grads in the family, making it clear to her daughters that they will follow in her footsteps to a college degree.

“I stress to them that the way to be somebody in life is to work hard and study hard,” Prince said.

Reynoza, 24, whose parents emigrated from the Mexican state of Michoacan, has helped organize a special Spanish-language graduation ceremony for Latino graduates, most of whom are first-generation college graduates like herself.

When she was growing up in Orland (Glenn County), she thought of college as a scary and foreign possibility. But her parents knew she had to go.

“When we came home from school, instead of turning on the TV, it was, ‘You need to do your homework until you go to sleep,’” said Reynoza, whose father was a ranch hand.

She understood that her parents had sacrificed, leaving their family and friends back in Mexico to try to provide better opportunities for their children.

With her parents unable to contribute anything to her education, Reynoza graduated with $14,000 in loans along with her double-major degree in psychology and Spanish and a minor in political science.

Undaunted, she plans to get a master’s degree in social work or child development, and then a doctorate in psychology.
Role-Plays on the Life of a College Student:
An Extension to “The Life and Challenges of a First-Generation College Student”

Instructions
1. Now that students have a notion of a first-generation college student’s experience, select eight students to participate in a role-play on the life of a college student.
2. Divide the eight role-players into groups of two, and give each student one role. (They may neither see nor read their partner’s role.)
3. Encourage the role-players to ad lib and improvise, but to keep the role-play realistic.
4. Have each group perform their role-plays in front of the entire class.
5. After each role-play, ask the class what other solutions or decisions the characters could have made.
6. After all the role-plays have been completed, lead a discussion. Discussion questions:
   - Are these role-plays realistic of what students experience in college? Why or why not?
   - What do you have to focus on now to be ready for college when you graduate from high school?
   - What do you think would be some of the greatest challenges and benefits of going to college?
   - Are you going to college? Were you planning to go to college before reading these biographies?
   - How many of you have changed your mind about going to college after reading these biographies?

The Life of a College Student: Role Plays
Instructions: Distribute the following roles to the student role-players.

1. Person A: Pretend that you are a first-year college student and you are upset because you are not doing well in most of your classes. You don’t have too much time to study, because you work 30 hours a week. You are considering dropping out of college because you think you are failing your classes and you feel you can’t stop working since you have financial responsibilities. You decide to mention your situation to Person B.

   Person B: Pretend you are a first-year college student and you are not doing well in your classes, but you decide to get tutoring and attend a study group that will help you to do better. You also have financial obligations, but instead of working, you decided to speak to your financial aid advisor about options. You encourage Person A to join you.

2. Person A: Pretend you are a high school senior and you have been admitted to college, but your parents tell you that they can’t pay for your tuition. You decide to tell Person B that you will not be going to college since you have no money to pay for it.

   Person B: Pretend you have been admitted to college but your parents will not be able to help you pay for college. You decided to speak to your high school counselor and found out that you can apply for financial aid, which offers grants and loans. You also apply for scholarships. You need to encourage Person A to not give up and to speak to the high school counselor so that Person A can also apply for financial aid and scholarships and go to college just like you.

3. Person A: Pretend this is your first week in college and you are homesick for family and friends. You feel like you don’t belong and you are seriously thinking of just leaving college and going home. You tell Person B about your plans to drop out of college.

   Person B: Pretend this is your first week in college and you are missing your family and friends from home, but you decide to get involved in different activities to keep busy. You also decided to speak to a peer counselor and told your new friends about how much you miss your family. This makes a difference because you now realize that you are not the only person who is missing home. You need to advise Person A to do the same.

4. Person A: Pretend you are a freshman in college. You enjoy going to parties. You received a scholarship based on your high school grades. You need to maintain a good GPA to continue receiving the scholarship, but unfortunately you are doing very badly in one of your classes and you need to get at least a C to keep your scholarship. The only way you can pass the course is by earning a C on your next test. However, you have promised your friends that you will join them for a party the night before the big test. You decided to speak to Person B about your situation.
**Person B:** Pretend you are a friend of Person A, and that your advice is there will always be an other party but the priority is to do well academically. You also remind Person A that scholarships are very difficult to get and once you lose a scholarship you cannot get it back. Also remind Person A that if people are your true friends, they will understand why you can’t go to the party.