**Agency, Responsibility, and Security:**

**A Decision Framework for the Careers of Harvard FGLI Seniors**

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**ABSTRACT**

This descriptive study untangles the complex influential forces on post-graduate plans for first-generation, low-income undergraduate seniors at Harvard while they think about jobs after college. Through twelve narrative-style interviews, the authors constructed a decision framework with three different branches or themes of decisions: social, financial, and personal. The three social factors that influenced their decisions include: 1) a liberal arts education differing from the vocational education they and their families had envisioned, 2) their parents’ lack of education increasing agency and autonomy, and 3) Harvard’s culture of elitism, wealth, and consulting. The major financial decisions centered around a great desire for financial security and success. Students felt indebted to their parents’ sacrifices and did not want to endure the same financial issues they did growing up. Lastly, FGLI students were very intrinsically motivated to find a career with a strong mission to give back to underserved communities and faced internal conflict while trying to reconcile their personal values.

**INTRODUCTION**

Education in the United States is often touted as a silver bullet to escaping poverty and achieving social mobility. Perhaps no group experiences this potential mobility jump more directly than first-generation (FG) students who are the first in their family to attend a higher education institution. First-generation, low-income (FGLI) students who attend elite institutions are true examples of pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, as they reach the pinnacle of higher education in spite of extreme disadvantages in navigating an education system and society with limited resources and support. A bachelor's degree from an elite institution is often equated with a certification of elevated social and economic status. A bachelor's degree from Harvard, in particular, holds a significant amount of social weight—not just in the higher education realm but throughout the world—significantly over-shadowing many other higher education institutions. For maybe the first time in their academic career, FG students at elite institutions hold a semblance of an advantage over their non-FG peers at non-elite institutions. Being admitted to Harvard and graduating with a Harvard degree is necessarily a step up in social mobility, given the symbolic and concrete value a Harvard degree holds.

However, despite this advantage, FGLI students still face additional challenges stemming from their families’ socioeconomic background when making career decisions. For example, on top of having to translate their liberal arts education to professional skills to employers, FGLI students also have to translate their career options and preferences to their families who are not familiar with many alternative career options. Many Harvard students universally feel a tremendous amount of responsibility to maximize their Harvard degrees. On top of this responsibility, FGLI students at Harvard feel an added pressure to give back to their families or communities and solidify themselves in a higher socioeconomic (SES) class, thus completing the social mobility journey. These FGLI students hold a very unique position, straddling two sides of an inequitable education system, one of privilege and one of disadvantage. So, what do FGLI students choose to do for a living when they attend elite liberal arts institutions and have practically unlimited resources—when the world is ostensibly their oyster? More specifically, what factors—from financial to social to psychological—influence Harvard FGLI seniors’ career choices and to what extent do these factors influence them?

FGLI students are not the only ones who face external and self-imposed pressures in choosing a career. Students from middle to high socio-economic status also face expectations from their parents or social class. However, this is outside the scope of this paper. Though FGLI students at elite institutions are a relatively small group of students, it is still important to analyze their decisions and behaviors. As mentioned previously, the FGLI students at Harvard represent social mobility at the frontier. It is critical to evaluate whether these trailblazers at Harvard, a place with abundant resources, actually reach full autonomy in their career decisions--or at least as much as their high SES peers. Studying FGLI students’ autonomy while choosing a career path can help administrations identify the areas where students *still* do not feel free or feel shepherded into certain careers. In other words, if there are areas in which even the world’s most “privileged poor,” a term coined by Anthony Jack, FGLI students at Harvard, still do not feel autonomous while choosing their plans after college, then those areas can be identified as residual background constraints that may hinder the social mobility journey. FGLI students at other colleges with less resources might even feel more restricted in their career choices. The FGLI experience at Harvard, while not nationally representative, answers fundamental questions about social mobility. Our research aims to understand the ostensible autonomy of FGLI students at Harvard and to analyze the social, economic, and psychological factors that influence the autonomy of FGLI students.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Many researchers across a variety of social science fields have looked at the college and career experiences of low-income and first-generation students. Our research, and therefore our literature review, centers around the economic, social, and psychological influences on FGLI students on the quest of social mobility.

***Social Influences***

FGLI students are exposed to starkly new experiences when they leave their home community to attend elite institutions. Social pressures from their new institutions and social pressures from back home influence their decision-making processes in college. Parents often play a major role in students’ decisions, and with evidence from the literature, there does appear to be a significant correlation between college and career choices and parental influence. Some FG students feel the pressure to choose a career that their parents want, and they feel extra pressure as the person in the family with the most potential to thrive socioeconomically (Davis, 2010).

Additionally, high-achieving FG students often feel obligated to live up to their potential (Jung & Young, 2017). This pressure stems from the ambition present in every high-achieving student and the expectations of greatness held by parents and even peers. After analyzing various statistics and studies, Falcon (2015) found that some of the obstacles FG students face consist of racial disparity, lack of self-esteem, and lack of college readiness. In addition to insecurity in their abilities, FG students face pressures from cultural isolation and peers. Cultural isolation makes FG students uncomfortable in their new environment and keeps them from thriving socially and academically. These factors demotivate students in the pursuit of postsecondary education and can make it difficult for them to persevere throughout college (Vanderploeg, 2015). Peer pressure comes from both sides of the spectrum; there are students who they may feel they could never compete with, and this may lower their self-esteem, and then there are the students that distract them from their academic pursuits with drugs and alcohol as they attempt to assimilate (Vanderploeg, 2015).

On the positive side, institutional programs have increased the success rate of students pursuing college and going into the workforce (Vanderploeg, 2015). These programs boost self esteem, show students their options, and give them the opportunity to discover their interests.

We, as researchers, took into account the impact that family, peers, and the environment have on students’ decisions and focused on these factors when interviewing subjects about their motivations for their prospective careers.

***Economic Influences***

Any college student facing a career decision faces a set of external economic pressures in their choices; skill matching, specific job markets, first-year earnings, costs of living are all on the minds of students regardless of FGLI status. However, since the FGLI identity is necessarily defined by economic status, FGLI students’ decisions and behavior rely even more heavily on those economic factors. Much of the literature around FGLI students looks at how their economically disadvantaged background influences their applications to college, their adjustment to college, their extracurricular choices, and, of course, their academic achievement. Pascarella et al. (2004) made several important findings. According to their analysis of the National Study of Student Learning surveys in the ‘90s, due to a lack of cultural capital, first-gen students have lower entering academic selectivity, fewer credit hours, more work hours, and lower levels of extracurricular / athletic / volunteer involvement. They take fewer courses in the social science, arts and humanities, and technical/professional areas. Collier and Morgan (2008) uses data from focus groups from Portland State University to study how well FG students understand and manage academic and family expectations. They find that first-gen students in particular reported significantly more problems with time management and prioritizing education and a lack of outside resources to support them. Education often took second priority to fulfilling obligations to jobs and family.

Much less of the literature focuses on FGLI students’ pathways after college, unless it is furthering their education in graduate schools. In one study, FG students were less likely to persist in postsecondary education and attained credentials at lower rates than their non FG counterparts (Nunez, 1998). The lack of post-education literature on FG students seems to suggest that once FGLI students earn their degree and leave the higher education system, their previous disadvantage disappears. They have gone through the system and are “caught up.” However, this is not the case. Manzoni and Streib (2019) found that a wage gap persists between FGLI students and non-FG students ten years after graduation. This gap can mostly be explained by individual characteristics—controlling for motherhood status or race. On the other hand, the researchers found that “the generational wage gap is more a product of labor market factors than educational ones” (Manzoni & Streib, 2019, p. 600). Analysis from the 1990 Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study confirmed that all FG students in their sample who graduated from the same institution or even with the same kind of degree earned comparable salaries and were employed in similar occupations as their non-FG peers (Nunez, 1998).

For our research, this would imply that interventions should focus on helping first-generation graduates enter the occupational sectors, occupations, and locations that pay the most instead of focusing on institutions, majors, or academic achievement’s impact on higher earnings—at least, if students wish to maximize their earnings. In our interviews, we sought to further explore how this gap begins in FGLI students’ decision framework. Lack of information, lack of confidence to succeed in a high-paying field, or a different set of values around occupational goals entirely are all possible explanations for this occupation effect on the wage gap.

While the few economic studies that focus on first generation students’ income and careers post-college provide valuable insight into trends over time, our research aims to understand the theory behind those decisions and trends. Rather than focusing on *what* decisions FGLI students make, we focused on understanding *why* they make the career choices that they do.

***Psychological Influences***

Mitchall and Jaeger (2018) clearly identify the pressure that parents impose on the decisions of students during their paths to college. The researchers present self-determination theory as a useful framework to analyze students’ decisions. The three basic concepts underlying self-determination theory are autonomy, competency, and relatedness, all of which, the study concluded, are heavily susceptible to the influence of parents. Autonomous decision-making is the ability to make choices freely without the pressure of friends or family. Competency is the confidence in one’s ability to make sound decisions. Relatedness, or the feeling of safety and belonging in relationships, promotes intrinsic motivation which in turn fosters competent and autonomous decision-making. The results of this study showed that students’ self-determination was enhanced when parents helped in college planning and let students make their own decisions. Students felt their motivation was undermined when families limited their choices, emphasized family responsibilities, and were not engaged in the college process. When preparing for our interviews, we used self-determination theory to motivate a subset of our interview questions.

Researcher Judith Harachiewicz studied the achievement gap of FGLI students, specifically in the life sciences. First-generation or low-income students often do not perform as well as their peers, and they are often discouraged by their low academic performance and end up leaving certain career paths because they feel like they cannot succeed. Furthermore, Harachiewicz states that some first-generation or low-income students might think of the “college environment as threatening, due to stereotypes about their group or a mismatch of cultural values (Harachiewicz, 2014, p. 375),” integrating the stereotype threat model with cultural mismatch theory. Importantly, this research study found that first-generation students are more likely to continue studying in the biosciences with psychological interventions. In Harachiewicz’s study, values affirmation intervention consisted of individuals affirming their core personal values in a threatening or stressful environment, specifically during academic testing. This helped re-establish personal worth and integrity reducing stress and bolstering confidence.

We hypothesized that FGLI students might choose careers to achieve institutional reform, which includes academia. Researcher Elvia Ramirez studied how race, class, and gender inequalities are entrenched in the first-year of Chicano or Latino graduate students using intersectionality theory in her article “¿Qué Estoy Haciendo Aquí? (What Am I Doing Here?).” We aimed to understand some of the possible difficulties of pursuing academia as a career path. The study conducted qualitative interviews and found that isolation, alienation, and impostor syndrome clashes with traditional academic culture and graduate school curricula. Microaggressions were the most prominent barriers during the transition of Chicanos and Latinos from undergraduate to graduate school (Ramirez, 2014).

Covarrubias and Fryberg (2015) studied family achievement guilt and survivor’s guilt in the context of higher education. These phenomena can be described as the guilt that first-generation students feel being the first ones to have gotten to study at a university and having privileges and achievements that their family does not. Through surveys, the study found that reflecting on helping one’s family led to less family achievement guilt for first-generation college students. However, it is important to note how influential these feelings of responsibility can be on students’ decisions in college. In this study, one student contemplated dropping out of college in order to work and help her family financially.

**METHODS**

For this research project, we collected qualitative data through in-depth narrative interviews with human subjects in which we asked questions to gain insight into how they decided on their next step after college. Our target population was first-generation, low-income undergraduate seniors at Harvard. We defined first-generation students as those students for whom neither parent holds a post-secondary degree. Additionally, we made sure that these students identified as first-generation, low-income. Rather than ask interview subjects directly what their family’s income bracket is, we determined low-income subjects through self-identification. We composed a series of questions designed to reveal the motives behind their desires to pursue their career path. Final interview questions naturally varied depending on follow-up questions to the subjects initial responses. However, similar information was gathered in each one. These interviews were semi-structured (interviews in which questions are prepared but may not follow the same order) in order to accommodate the dynamics of human conversation and uniqueness of human experiences. We acknowledged the possibility that students may answer several questions at once due to the design of our open-ended questions.

Before the start of the interview, we had each participant read and sign a consent form which gave them the option to consent to either a confidential or on-record interview, as well as the option to be audio-recorded or not. Another component to the interview was our background questions form which gave us the opportunity to collect basic demographic information at the end of the interview. After our interviews, we transcribed them using Otter.ai and read through every interview to draw out the key points from each participant.

Interview-based data allowed us as researchers to explore rich nuances and complex reasons behind behavior that are not easily captured in a survey, such as emotions and subjective insights. One drawback to the interview method is that the sample size is usually much smaller than what researchers can reach with a survey. We speculated that with a survey, our subjects would not be willing to give as much detail in their responses, and if we asked quantitative questions, it would limit their chances to express themselves completely given that experiences are unique. Life experiences are crucial to shaping a person, so by removing limitations on the subjects’ responses, we hoped to collect a more holistic set of data.

Our initial outreach to interview subjects targeted student groups specific to first-generation students like FYRE and Primus. The First-Year Retreat and Experience is a pre-orientation program for incoming Harvard freshman from low-income, minority, or first-generation backgrounds. The program, established in 2018 and led by upperclassmen leaders, has graduated two full classes (over 200 students). Primus was formerly known as First-Generation Student Union. We sent out an email containing an interest form to the FYRE and Primus email lists in hopes of receiving a high number of interested seniors. We interviewed subjects in private spaces, to allow them to speak freely and openly. The interviewee sample consisted of twelve Harvard first-generation, low-income students mostly from public high schools. While the initial research design called for a sample of exclusively seniors, one interviewee is a junior due to a number of cancellations and limitations in voluntary response methods.

Data was analyzed by reviewing and familiarizing ourselves with the answers given by our subjects. While reviewing the data, we took note of the key points and discussed themes and patterns within the data. We focused on subjects’ interests and reason(s) as well as external influences for their decision to pursue a specific career track.

**POSITIONALITY**

Researcher Cordova Carrizales, a first-generation and low-income student, attended a large public high school in an urban area. She and her parents immigrated from Mexico and did not receive an education beyond middle school. She herself has grappled almost daily with the very question that this research project is attempting to answer. Researcher Perez, also a first-generation and low-income student, attended a large public high school in an urban area. His mother attended some high school, and his father only recently finished a college degree in Mexico. Perez worked intensive manual labor jobs during high school and has since decided that he does not enjoy labor-intensive jobs. Researcher Williams, a non-first-generation and high-income student, attended a small, private school in a suburban setting for all twelve years of her schooling. Her mother is a German immigrant and a first-generation college student. Her father and mother both hold PhDs, and her mother is an assistant professor at a higher education institution. Given that every researcher in this research team has personal ties to the first-generation experience, our personal experiences will inevitably influence the questions that we decide to ask our interviewees, how we choose to interact with them, and how we interpret our findings. Our experiences are the very reason we even decided that mapping out the factors that influence first-generation students’ career choices was an important question.

During the interviews with first-generation students, we disclosed our similar backgrounds and made it clear that we were not studying first-generation students to tokenize their experiences but as peers who were also trying to understand themselves.

Our similar experiences created a relationship of trust and willingness to share more intimate, even vulnerable, thoughts. Our questions were posed carefully since we know what questions we would be willing to answer about our own experiences and what questions we would not be willing to answer. The questions are nuanced and specific since we are not focused on asking questions about the basic first-generation experience since we are already intimately familiar with it. We also understand that all first-generation experiences are different and that not any one set of questions will adequately dissect a person’s experience. In order to account for this, we encouraged interviewees to introduce themselves and talk extensively to allow us to ask the most relevant set of questions.

In order to prevent our personal biases to tinge the collection of our data and presentation of our findings, we recorded our interviews in addition to taking handwritten notes.

**ETHICS**

In order to protect the confidentiality and mental well-being of our interviewees, we conducted our interviews with four main goals: 1) to obtain clear and informed consent, 2) to conduct interviews in a comfortable and welcoming fashion, 3) to collect and present data anonymously, 4) to respect the privacy of our interviewees.

In order to obtain clear and informed consent, we crafted our interviewer introduction to express our positionality, our reason for choosing to explore this topic of research, the purpose of our interview questions, and our intentions with the collected interview questions. Though we disclosed that we were trying to map out the factors that influence first-generation, low-income students while making a career choice, we did not disclose our hypothesis or categories of factors to prevent us from influencing their answers.

To make sure that our interviewees were comfortable, we explained that some of our questions may touch on potentially difficult or sensitive subjects such as family dynamics and pressures, career prospects, and their home communities. We made it clear that if the interviewee felt uncomfortable at any point, they should feel empowered to ask for a break or for us to stop recording or to stop the interview entirely. Our default place of interview was a private conference room in the Smith Center. However, we asked the interviewees if they would prefer another space.

To maintain anonymity, we also made clear that their words would never be attributed to them in our paper nor in any easily accessible medium. Their names will be stored in online password protected file, and their interviews will only be identified through an ID number in a Google folder shared with the researchers and their instructors. The audio recordings of their interviews will be destroyed, but the transcripts will remain on file after the research project in order to maintain a complete record of data collection. The password protected file identifying the interviews will be destroyed.

To respect the privacy of our interviewees, we made sure that every question that we asked advanced the purpose of the study. We crafted every question and justified in a brief group discussion why the question is important. We made sure that all of our questions were directly relevant to our cause and not unnecessarily intrusive.

**LIMITATIONS**

In conducting this research project, we encountered a few limitations. First, our sample size was not of sufficient size to draw out proper conclusions for the entire FGLI population. We sent out an interest form to the Primus and FYRE email lists and received a total of five responses. Within the FGLI community, there is great diversity, and it was difficult to find willing participants that collectively embodied the diversity of the community.

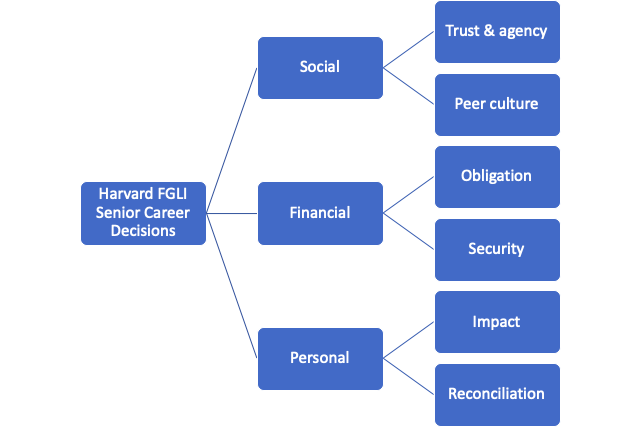
**RESULTS**

***Interviewee Demographics***

Our interviewee sample consisted of twelve Harvard first-generation, low-income students mostly from public high schools. Based on recent research most notably, Tony Jack’s 2018 book “The Privileged Poor,” FGLI students who attended elite private high schools transition into college differently than their peers who did not attend a private high school. However, we found that the students we interviewed, regardless of their secondary school background, still made career decisions according to our framework. To screen for low-income, all our respondents reported they were on full or partial financial aid. We had an even distribution of male and female interviewees. Regarding racial demographics, six out of twelve interviewees identified as Hispanic/Latino; four identified as white; and two identified as Asian and African-American respectively. In terms of religious affiliation, six out of the twelve respondents identified as Christian, and the rest reported they were not religious. In academic interests, five respondents were concentrating in a STEM field, five in the social sciences, and two in the humanities. The sample heavily represented FGLI students with ties to the immigrant experience, either as first-generation immigrant or second-generation immigration.

***Decision Tree***

Our analysis of the data led to the decision framework in the figure below. The social, financial, and personal factors originated from FGLI’s students’ experiences before college and while at Harvard. In the rest of the results section, we will deconstruct each theme of influences and analyze how students made their decisions.



***Social Branch***

First-generation, low-income seniors at Harvard discussed three main social factors that influenced the way in which they made decisions about their career. First, a liberal arts education was very different from the way they and their parents envisioned the preparation for their career. Students had to learn how to connect a liberal arts education to the job market and explain this to their parents. Second, their parents’ lack of education significantly increased the agency and autonomy with which the students made decisions. Third, the Harvard culture of elitism and wealth surrounding on-campus recruitment for consulting and finance careers heavily influenced the career decisions of almost every single student we interviewed.

Given that none of the students’ parents had graduated from college, their parents had a very limited idea of what a liberal arts education was and how it related to the job market. Parents expected their students to treat their undergraduate years at Harvard College like attending a vocational school. Parents often expected their children to follow the academic paths of an engineer, doctor, or lawyer because these were familiar, prestigious jobs which offered financial stability

*STUDENT 1: “So [ my parents] were not necessarily concerned that I was not going to have a job. They just didn't know what I was going to do with my life…. They're like, “what are you going to do with sociology?”I think for them, they viewed what you study kind of as a vocational training. So they thought whatever I'm studying, that will be an extension of what I'm going to do as a career. So if I study economics, that’s to be an extension of me working in business. I studied biology, it's going to be an extension of me doing medicine. Or if I do engineering, I'm going to be an engineer. And so with a liberal arts education, it can be complicated to figure out what are you going to do.”*

*STUDENT 4: “Back in El Salvador, when you go to college, you’re going to college for one specific career, like, let’s say electrician. You’re studying to be an electrician when you graduate, that’s what you’re gonna do. And so I think trying to explain to them that going to a liberal arts school, right, you don’t really do that.”*

Despite other pressures at Harvard to pursue classic careers like doctor or lawyer, some students actually felt that their separation from their parents and Harvard experience significantly expanded their career options. One student who eventually wants to have a career in public service explained:

*STUDENT 6: “I do have this nice position of being a Harvard graduate. If I were at community college, I doubt I would think that I could contribute, or have enough social capital to actually do anything. I mean, if I went to community college, I probably would have just stuck to something in science, or STEM, and then maybe done some public service on that side. But I doubt I would have felt as comfortable taking that leap without the support that Harvard has given me.”*

Even though students feel that not having a college-educated adult career mentor is very disorienting and isolating, this lack of mentorship granted them almost complete autonomy to make decisions about their career without having to consult adults for support. The FGLI students had some degree of freedom to shape their academic and career lives as they saw fit. The parents have a very limited idea of what their child studies or what kind of culture their students live in.

*STUDENT 3: “I think that they have a lot of trust in me. And what I'm going to do the right thing I think I've like, convinced them of that.”*

*STUDENT 14: “They have no idea. I've had to explain everything from college to stem cell biology to consulting to them and I'm fairly sure they still don't understand any of those things? Maybe because I haven't explained it well, just because it's not within their comprehension of anything they've seen whilst they've been alive. So yeah, I don't think they really understand what I do. They know that it sounds like a perfect job and I'm happy. But I don't think they understand the work that I do or why I do it. Likewise for the extracurriculars, they don't really understand why I did work with FYRE, why I'm doing work with diversity right now, what that means or why that's an issue. But they do give me a great and almost absolute degree of agency to do what I want.”*

Though it is unfortunate to not have familial mentors as a first-generation student, these students have a great deal of freedom in their academic choices. This autonomy in decision making aligns with the literature that discusses how important it is for people to feel independent and competent while making decisions.

The social pressures from peers and Harvard culture around consulting and finance careers heavily influenced the job decisions of FGLI students. No matter what career path they decided on, all interviewees mentioned consulting in their decision framework. Some felt guilty that they were not interested in high-paying consulting job which could help their family financially. On the other hand, some accepted offers fearing they would not feel fulfilled.

*STUDENT 14: “This was a high paying job, and I knew that would provide a lot of job security. On the less willful side, I think the timing was opportune, in that because consulting and finance recruits so early in the semester, and I felt a degree of pressure to participate in said interviews, because otherwise I know that I would feel as if I was behind. Feeling like I've been behind is a common occurrence in my life as a first gen. So, in order to try and stay with the pack and not be behind everyone else, I think applied to consulting. I also think that being able to support my family and have financial stability is a huge bonus. And having post grad security as an immigrant to the country next year, is also a huge benefit, which education firms would not have been able to provide.”*

Students described not being familiar with consulting before starting Harvard. However, the sheer amount of people on campus who do consulting and the support and resources available for consulting interviews prompted them to explore consulting as an option. Consulting recruiters market the position as financially stable, a great starting point for other careers, a chance to have significant impact by working with top companies, as well as an entry-level position with great responsibility and independence. These are all assets that appealed to a FGLI student’s background and desire for financial stability, impact, and comfort with independence. As Student 1 described, a feeling of inadequacy at Harvard prompted him to pursue a career with high prestige, as a way to validate himself and feel on equal footing with some of his non-first-gen peers. Some students, however, ultimately decided to not join consulting. These students place heavy emphasis on their values and interests, which they felt did not match with a consulting position. Even the students who ultimately accepted consulting offers feared that they would not feel fulfilled and that the FGLI identity that they so strongly held and their mission to help other students like them would feel suppressed.

In this way, family’s lack of understanding could have two effects. A parents’ lack of understanding put pressure on the student to justify their career choice, and/or it granted the student more power and autonomy in choosing a career. Many FGLI students also framed their decisions around peer influence, particularly with regards to consulting and finance careers.

***Financial Branch***

In addition to the social factors that influenced these students’ career choices, every student mentioned the importance of financial security. This was such an important factor to most respondents for two reasons. First, they feel indebted to their parents’ sacrifices. Second, they do not want to endure the same financial issues they went through when they were younger.

Most of the students we interviewed are children of immigrants whose parents work blue collar jobs. FGLI students who are second generation immigrants feel that they must repay their parents for making the difficult life-changing decision to come to the U.S. to secure their financial well-being and safety. There appears to be no noticeable difference in desire for financial security when comparing first-generation and second-generation immigrants. Many students clarified that their parents did not explicitly expect them to provide for their parents financially. Rather, this was an implicit pressure the students felt. Even if they were not to directly repay their parents, the students often felt a general pressure to be successful and financially stable themselves, so that their parents’ sacrifices were not in vain. In this way, FGLI students felt like an investment, and their career choices were their next step in returning on that investment.

*STUDENT 3: “She would always say that I'm investing myself to at the end of the day to payoff. And I think she sees me as a little bit of an investment a little bit, just because, she sacrificed a lot. She's worked so much. She came from Mexico where she didn't have sh\*\*. She sees me as an investment. So, again, the [question is] when I'm going to return on investment.”*

Being raised in households where money was a commodity, students feel compelled to seek jobs with salaries that enable them to live comfortably while also earning enough to give back to their families *and* their communities. There is a desire to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. This desire influences their careers from an early age. Many FGLI students said their career decision framework began significantly before college or high school when they quickly ruled out the manual labor jobs of their parents.

*STUDENT 11: “My mom, she's a housekeeper, and I feel like her being a housekeeper has influenced me because sometimes I go to work with them. She's always like, ‘See, this is why you go to school, so you don’t have to be miserable like I am.’”*

Students’ desire for financial stability not only ruled out manual labor jobs but also dissuaded them from pursuing some of their artistic passions. Many of these students had an interest in the arts, but they all shied away from an artistic career because of the lack of job security and lower wages.

*STUDENT 5: “I grew up doing a lot of acting and, like, theater in high school, and then it kind of stopped once I got here, like midway through college, but, if I had, like, no barriers whatsoever, I would probably just try to do acting, but obviously it's never going to happen. That's kind of my thing, but it's so hard to make it in that field. I don't love it that much to risk everything that I have, and I also don't have the financial security to do that or though all the things are that are necessary to do that.”*

Following passions and interests tied to severe risk and instability was a luxury. Being able to pursue a career in the arts felt like a pursuit meant for people further up the socioeconomic ladder. Many FGLI students felt like it was not their place to pursue that passion but would want to create those opportunities for other people. One FGLI student who accepted a job in consulting said:

*STUDENT 14: “ I thought about it [dancing]. It's like a dream. Yes. But I think that there's so much instability with [dancing]. I just think it's unreasonable for me. But I would be so fulfilled to just dance every day, and I feel like that's like the human ideal to me. Like, we should solve all problems in the world so that everybody can dance all the time and just fulfill and make and create. I don't think that's a possibility for me.”*

However, it is important to mention that some students’ low-income background actually made them more willing to pursue a career with a lower salary. One student pursuing a career in government said:

*STUDENT 6: “I never had money, so I don't really care about. I don't think I need the McKinsey salary to sustain a healthy happy lifestyle. So, I just figured I’m going to do something I’m interested in.”*

***Personal Branch***

Beyond the external social and financial forces that FGLI students face, these students add personal limitations to their own career options based on their values. These personal constraints usually manifest themselves in an intense desire for mission-driven or impactful work for underprivileged communities, and, further down the decision timeline, a reconciliation of their chosen or potential career path with the “other world”—the environment whence they came.

Surprisingly enough, this intense pressure to “give back” does not come from community members, from their family, or even from Harvard. In fact, the search for an altruistic career seemed to march on in spite of those influences, which encouraged high salaries as a priority. The mission-focused drive is an internal pressure and obligation the students impose on themselves. Students define and rationalize “giving back” in many forms. Some interviewees felt a strong obligation to give back to their home communities prompting them to consider which channel would be best suited for their communities’ needs, thus influencing where they eventually wanted to work. Some felt weaker ties to their home communities and instead were committed to giving back to a more general underprivileged population. The commitment to the FGLI community rose from their personal experiences. One FGLI Harvard senior who had attended an underfunded Chicago public charter school emphasized how his lived experience influenced his internal commitment to give back through education:

*STUDENT 3: “If you have privilege, it's hard for you to break down the thing that is giving you privilege. I wouldn't know, but maybe I would still see these inequalities and still want to contribute to them [if I went to private school], but I think I mostly want to break down these inequalities because I was subject to the consequences of these inequalities... I think that comes with a lot of first-gen, low-income students- a desire to give back to the people from your identity. I don't want people from my background to also get f\*\*\*ed over by the education systems. I want to make it better.”*

These sentiments mirror the survivor’s guilt theory of previous literature. Students feel they were granted a special opportunity to attend Harvard, and if they turned their back on issues they faced along their journey to Harvard, they would be betraying all the FGLI students just a few years behind them. At the same time, they feel an obligation to make the most of their Harvard degree in building value for their individual gain instead of focusing their energy on FGLI issues, because they were the ones who “survived.” This attempt to reconcile the two worlds—the in-need communities with the elite opportunities after Harvard—is apparent in several career decision pathways for students, and especially difficult for those selecting into high-paying careers. One student who was pursuing a career in finance and switched to education stated:

*STUDENT 1: “I was trying to figure out how to fit working at this high paying job that is so divorced from the communities that I care about and the communities that raised me. And I didn’t know how to put them together. And so now figuring out how to adjust that juxtaposition of those parts of my identity, I decided to let go of one to the other.”*

The student decided to pursue education, because at the time of his internal conflict, he had recently been elected to a leadership position of an FGLI affinity group, which solidified his loyalty to helping his identity. The student eventually took an offer in consulting. Another FGLI student who will be working at a top consulting firm next year with a high salary stated:

*STUDENT 14: “I worry that I'll feel guilty consistently about escaping a system rather than trying to make it better. There are plenty of good arguments that I can make that my role as a consultant actually gives me power to improve the situation of income inequality in a number of different ways. But I think overall, I'm not going back home and helping, I'm not teaching low income youth. I'm not making support systems. I won't have time to advise. I won't have time to mentor kids who deserve mentoring. So yeah, I'm really escaping the system, rather than reaching a level of which I can make it better, because I know that I could live a perfectly comfortable lifestyle on about half the salary and be in education, in one of those community development roles. Yeah, I feel guilty for the people I'm leaving behind. The number of people who are exactly like me, who won't be able to do this [motions around to indicate Harvard], because I'm doing this [consulting].”*

As mentioned previously, several students described that the omnipresence of Harvard culture and allure of financial security may have tempted them to pursue consulting or finance. However, quite a few actively decided not to pursue that career path because they felt it betrayed their commitment to direct impact.

Students who chose the medical, STEM, or academia fields also had difficulty rationalizing the directness of their impact on underprivileged communities. The timeline of these careers requires several years of additional education and further investment in the individual student. Also, the work itself, especially in academia, can be several steps removed from the populations these students wish to benefit. One pre-med FGLI student ultimately decided to pursue clinical medicine rather than a research position in response to this strong obligation to have direct impact on underprivileged communities:

*STUDENT 2: “I just lost interest in [working in a lab], because I think I just decided I was more interested in applying the therapies than I was in inventing new ones… I realized that anything you do in the lab is going to have an impact 10 or 20 years in the future if it works. And not that I didn't enjoy it, because it was great to use what I learned in school in the real world, but I don't know. I just felt it wasn't for me. I prefer to try to make sure that everybody can have what we already have before I try to make new stuff that's better.”*

Another FGLI student who hoped to pursue a PhD in physics and become a professor also felt removed from his community. However, he was able to rationalize pursuing his academic interests as an indirect arm of support to FGLI students:

*STUDENT 3: “I’m not directly attacking, helping, or fixing the education system. But me being in the spaces [where we are not represented and] going against it, is important*.”

Taking up space in elite places where few FGLI students reside becomes a proxy for direct impact and a rationalization FGLI students use in deciding their plans after college. The feeling of circuitous impact in academia is also true for non-STEM fields. Another FGLI senior with plans to pursue a postgraduate degree in sociology rationalized his continuation in academia with the intention to return to direct impact work later on in his career.

*STUDENT 4: “If there's this post grad opportunity and the mission based aspect of it isn't as strong as I would ideally like it to be, but I know that I'm going to obtain these very critical skills, and it's only a short term thing, let's say three years max, I think I am comfortable compromising. Because I know that long term, the job does fit into this larger role for me.”*

Through this decision framework, FGLI students were able to hold onto their commitment for public service by placing it later in the long-term plan. They would continue to develop themselves academically or professionally in order to have the best impact later on. In this way, every career decision was a step closer to an impactful, mission-oriented career.

However, the struggle to reconcile two worlds caused these FGLI students a great deal of stress in their college careers and in their decisions for plans after college. Rationalizing these two worlds is an internal pressure, which many students admit they may never be able to fully satisfy. One undecided FGLI senior said:

*STUDENT 5: “I kind of feel like I live in two worlds, where, unlike in the beginning, I made a very big effort of trying to connect those two worlds. And then I realized that that was going to be impossible and that I was going to take such a huge toll on me. So now I've come to like the resignation, or the realization, that that's just not going to happen. And so I tried to merge them as much as I can, but understanding that they're never really going to be one.”*

Merging a world of poverty and injustice with the immense privilege and opportunities of a Harvard degree is not simple, nor the same for all FGLI students. The commitment to live in one world and serve the world they left requires complex rationalization and compromises in their decisions.

**CONCLUSION**

Through this descriptive study, we attempted to untangle the complex influential forces on first-generation, low-income undergraduate seniors at Harvard while they think about jobs after college. Through narrative-style interviews, we explored students’ reasoning for choosing certain career pathways and created a decision framework to understand the factors that influence post-graduate plans.

We collected data through twelve narrative interviews, scheduled through email outreach, personal connections, first-generation email lists, and recommendations from early interviewees. From the analyzed data, we constructed a decision framework with three different branches or themes of decisions: social, financial, and personal. The three social factors that influenced their decisions include: 1) a liberal arts education differing from the vocational education they and their families had envisioned, 2) their parents’ lack of education increasing agency and autonomy, and 3) Harvard’s culture of elitism, wealth, and consulting. The major financial decisions centered around a great desire for financial security and success. Students felt indebted to their parents’ sacrifices and did not want to endure the same financial issues they did growing up. Lastly, FGLI students were very intrinsically motivated to find a career with a strong mission to give back to underserved communities and faced internal conflict while trying to reconcile their personal values.

It is clear that despite attending the most well-endowed university in the world with practically unlimited resources, FGLI students still do not have the freedom to make decisions about their career, considering their self-imposed responsibilities to give back to underserved communities and the pressure to obtain financial security.

***Future Study***

Our target population of first-generation and low-income seniors at Harvard is extremely heterogeneous, including variance in hometown, immigrant status, native language, family structure, secondary school, and country of origin. In this project, we did not control for any variable except for college, class year, first-generation status, and low-income status. Controlling for more variables would have to less noisy data with a tradeoff in increased difficulty in finding interviewees that fit all the criteria and would be willing to participate. However, in order to draw more robust conclusions in a future project, we would control for as many demographic variables as possible to isolate the impact of FGLI status on the decision map of career decisions. Other interesting projects include expanding our interview pool to other elite liberal arts colleges in the country, isolating the decision frameworks toward specific career paths, or comparing the career decision maps of privileged FGLI students to non-privileged FGLI students.

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