FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"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 know how to navigate the system – e.g. how to find resources, internships, funding, or jobs. In families with four-year college graduates, children often grow up receiving an understanding of the way academia works. They also have passed along to them the confidence to approach authorities and institutions with a sense of competence and capability to 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 prior to 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 about some of the basics may be slightly steeper, but you’ll get there!
• Find a trusted friend or a Harvard resource, such as a Peer Advising Fellow (PAF), a proctor, your resident dean, or your freshman 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.

"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-gen students often find themselves explaining, even justifying, their academic and extracurricular choices to family members. This is a difficult task, especially when having to reassure 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 “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, your experiential and practical learning through extracurricular activities, volunteer work, lab experience, summer and term-time jobs, and internships also prepares you for any career you are interested in post-graduation.

The text above is excerpted from “I’m a First-Generation Student: Am I the Only One Who...?,” by Sheila M. Reindl and Claire Shindler of Harvard University’s Bureau of Study Counsel (BSC). © 2012 President and Fellows of Harvard College. The authors and the BSC grant permission to the Harvard College First Generation Student Union to use these excerpts of the handout in this resource guide. The full handout can be found in the Handouts and Resources section of the BSC website at bsc.harvard.edu.

Sign-Up for a Peer/Alumni Mentor:

*Statistic from: http://www.firstgenerationharvardalumni.com
WHO WE ARE

The First Generation Student Union (FGSU) is one of Harvard’s newest officially recognized student organizations. Started in the Spring of 2013 and officially recognized by the College on November 15, 2013, the FGSU has a three-part mission:

- First, to facilitate what can be a difficult transition to college for first-generation Harvard students by connecting students to the resources that already exist on campus.
- Second, to foster a sense of community among first-generation students at Harvard. One of the things that makes the first-generation identity so special is that it can span such a wide range of personal experiences. Unfortunately, this also means that it can be difficult for first-gen students to know who other first-gen students are--it’s almost like we’re an invisible minority on campus. FGSU seeks to make the first-generation community visible, cohesive and empowering.
- Lastly, FGSU exists to advocate for a greater institutional commitment to first-generation students on behalf of the Harvard College administration. Currently, there are very few resources that exist specifically for first-generation students on campus, especially compared to some of Harvard’s peer institutions. FGSU seeks to change this by providing student voice and input for relevant administrative policymaking.

CHECK US OUT

Want to learn more about us, or even better, get involved?
- Check out our website (www.hcs.harvard.edu/firstgen)
- Like us on Facebook (facebook.com/harvardfirstgen)
- And/or shoot us an email with any questions you have at harvardfirstgen@gmail.com!

THINGS TO CONSIDER BEFORE GETTING ON CAMPUS

Below is a short list, written by current first-gen students and alumni, highlighting ways to prepare for Harvard before your freshman year. We want to help make your transition to college a little easier, so we are sharing with you the things that we wish we knew when we were incoming freshmen!

Take a Look at Courses
- Have an idea of what kind of classes you would like to take.
- Look at the course catalog which contains all the courses offered.
- Read the introductory notes to understand how to use the catalog.
- The course catalog will also have the day/time/location of each class which will help you for shopping period when you get to test out all the classes you’re interested in.
- www.registrar.fas.harvard.edu/courses-exams/courses-instruction
- Look at the Q-Guide
- This is a guide that reports the results of each year’s course evaluations. You can view the overall score, rated difficulty, workload, recommendation score along with comments about each course.
- www.fas.harvard.edu/~evals/qguide.htm
- Click on the link “Click Here to View Course Evaluation Data”
- You will be prompted for your Harvard ID and PIN.

Get Familiar with Extracurricular Activities
- Sign-up for a Pre-Orientation Program
  - http://fdo.fas.harvard.edu/pages/pre-orientation
- Visit the Office of Student Life website: osl.fas.harvard.edu
  - The Office of Student Life integrates the academic, residential, and co-curricular spheres of students’ lives, linking the out-of-class experience to the academic mission of the College and incorporating students’ intellectual, public service, and leadership interests with their future aspirations.

Explore Potential Job Opportunities
- Visit the Student Employment Office website: seo.harvard.edu
  - The Student Employment Office (SEO) works with faculty, the community, and all University departments to create term-time and summer employment opportunities for students. As part of the Financial Aid Office, they administer the Federal Work Study Program university-wide and also provide undergraduate students with funding to pursue their own academic interests outside of the classroom through the research programs highlighted on their website.