

**First-Generation Participation in Professional Organizations at Higher Education
Institutions: A Qualitative Research Study Using Social Capital and Bioecological Systems**

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Tristan Grubbs

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this
assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

Advisor

William Davis, Department of Engineering and Society

I. Introduction

Recent reporting on career pipelines at top universities indicates professional student organizations' key role in employment opportunities (Tucker-Smith, 2025). They increasingly function as gateways to internships, professional networks, and full-time employment (Simpfenderfer et al., 2024). This is because employability is not just a set of technical skills related to the job, but rather a complex set of characteristics, including social connectedness and one's view of themselves professionally (Jackson et al., 2024, pp. 1309-1311). However, as career success gets tied to social networks, equity concerns arise. First-generation students are affected by barriers like a lack of awareness (Nguyen et al., 2024) and lower social capital (Sudbrock et al., 2024) that create different tiers of access between students. Although we know professional and career-oriented organizations benefit career outcomes, our knowledge is limited regarding how the barriers affect first-generation students' involvement in the organizations, and how higher education institutions can build systems to improve equity. However, unequal access to these organizations risks continuing the existing inequalities in higher education institutions.

The barriers and possible negative effects on first-generation students have long-term consequences that can affect their long-term career prospects (Simpfenderfer et al., 2024). Beyond the individuals, the unique way first-generation students view the opportunity college provides means that barriers affecting the students can also affect their communities (Abeyta & Du, 2025, pp. 11-13).

In this paper, I argue that higher education institutional opportunity structures are the primary cause of reinforced inequalities stemming from social capital, therein limiting first-generation students' engagement in professional and career-oriented organizations. These

structures can be redesigned to create a more equitable opportunity ecosystem. To approach this conclusion, I interviewed first-generation UVA students to learn about their awareness of these organizations, how accessible the organizations feel, how the organizations affected the students' confidence, and how UVA's systems helped or hurt their participation. Semi-structured interviews allow students to openly describe their experiences in a way that large survey studies cannot. Demetriou et al. (2017) similarly used qualitative evidence to examine first-generation students' activities, relationships, and ability to navigate college. This supports the use of interviews as an appropriate way to study organization access and belonging. I analyzed the interviews and other related studies through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Demetriou et al., 2017) and Putnam's bonding and bridging social capital (Soria & Cole, 2023). For the bioecological systems theory, I discuss how an institution's structures and systems, the exosystem, affect the other layers of the opportunity ecosystem in a way that can positively and negatively affect first-generation students. I also analyzed how institutional opportunity structures shape first-generation students' access to bridging capital. By examining how first-generation students see the accessibility and culture of these organizations, this research adds a qualitative insight into how institutional opportunity structures can affect participation. While a great deal of prior research emphasizes individual's and outcomes, this paper argues that institutional communication and opportunity structures play a central role in shaping first-generation students' engagement. (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020)

II. Problem Definition

Professional and career-oriented organizations function as an informal career-building infrastructure in higher education. This is due to the complex characteristics that make up employability beyond that of technical skill (Jackson et al., 2024). Jackson et al. (2024) went on to demonstrate that participation in these organizations has a positive correlation with graduation outcomes. Simpfenderfer et al. (2024, pp. 678-682) extended on this idea with alumni data showing that not only do pre-professional activities like these organizations affect your job right after graduation but, by virtue of your first job opening doors to future jobs, these organizations affect students' entire future careers. Other research into health care professionals in professional organizations after graduating shows that benefits can include networking opportunities and staying updated with current trends (Michael et al., 2016). Together, these studies suggest that professional and career-oriented organizations are influential career accelerators and, therefore, unequal access to them can create unequal career outcomes that enforce current inequity.

Access to these professional organizations is not purely individual either; rather, structural barriers play a key role. Simpfenderfer et al. (2024) states that internships, an important gateway to jobs after graduation, are often accessed through networks. Similarly, Jackson et al. (2024, pp. 1315-1322) identifies awareness as a key barrier and one that is not evenly distributed among students. It continues by arguing that opportunities should be embedded in the institution's curriculum. If they are not, their participation depends on a student's own awareness, which can create gaps in students' opportunity ecosystem due to the inequity of knowledge of the institutions .

First-generation students are distinct in their positionality in higher education institutions. That being said, the definition of first-generation itself is largely contested. Ives & Castillo-Montoya (2020) discusses the varying definitions of first-generation, as it related to higher

education. These different definitions can be statistically significant. Toutkoushian et al. (2018) found that in a sample of 7,300 students, between 22% and 77% could be first-generation depending on one's definition, a 55% difference. According to Ives & Castillo-Montoya (2020), the common definitions are less defined parameters composing 48% of studies, neither parent graduated composing 35% of studies, neither parent attended college composing 15% of studies, and one parent graduated from college composing 2% of studies. For my study, I will be using the neither parents graduated definition. Across the definitions, common trends of structural barriers emerged: a limited college knowledge set, cultural mismatches, a sense of uncertainty, and feelings of not belonging (Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). The status of first-generation students indicates a position of inheriting a limited knowledge of higher education from their parents.

When looking at Putnam's social capital, there are two types: bonding and bridging. Bonding capital is gained from the close relationships we make with people, best friends and family, and bridging capital comes from extended networks, acquaintances and colleagues (Putnam, 2000). According to Sudbrock et al. (2024, pp. 39-42), first-generation students were found to have less social capital than their peers. A majority of this was family bonding social capital, but there was a measurable difference in peer social capital, which would be the students' bridging capital. Bridging capital is the type I will be discussing most because research suggests that it expands institutional and career opportunities (Soria & Cole, 2023; Simpfenderfer et al., 2024). Based on this, first-generation students need clear access to opportunities to build bridging capital to create an equitable environment between them and their peers.

An institution's structure can also affect opportunity access. For instance, in Inkelas et al., (2006, pp. 416-417) Living-Learning (LL) programs are tested to see if they can smooth the

academic and social transition to college. The programs were found to have a small to moderate positive effect on the first-generation students due to the tight-knit community they were able to build, which increased their confidence. This is an example of how institutional structures can be built to favor building social capital in first-generation students, increasing equity, and leading to a successful college transition for first-generation students. This suggests that without structured systems like this, students have to rely on informal pathways, which may not have the same equity creating power.

The first-generation students' belonging is not just a feeling but is integral to college success. I have already discussed how first-generation students often enter college with less bridging capital in peer-to-peer relationships that make up their network, but Sudbrock et al. (2024, pp 42-43) also suggest these weaker networks can undermine students' belonging and persistence. On the contrary, similar to in Living-Learning programs, creating structures that allow first-generation students to increase social capital leads to an increased sense of belonging (Soria & Cole, 2023; Thornhill et al., 2023). Therefore, if the institutional opportunity structures are not in place to help build first-generation social capital, and therefore their sense of belonging in their environment, they will be less likely to be confident. This lack of confidence can hurt first-generation students in professional spaces that focus on the complex characteristics of employability, of which confidence is one. This could, in turn, reduce first-generation students' engagement in these professional spaces.

Furthermore, these spaces are often countercultural to first-generation students. Professional and career-oriented organizations often shape themselves after the culture of the professional world they are attempting to prepare students for. That means their language can be rooted in competitiveness, prestige, and career acceleration, all of which are individualistic.

Abeyta & Du (2025, pp. 11-13) present a quantitative analysis of first-generation and continuing-generation students, that being students who had at least one parent finish college. The study found that first-generation students are more likely to be motivated by family and community, compared to their continuing-generation counterparts, who are motivated by personal career fulfillment. Based on this study, continuing-generation students' motivations are more of a natural fit for professional and career-oriented organizations. This motivational mismatch can further decrease first-generation students' sense of belonging in these spaces.

Synthesizing these ideas, we know a great deal about the space I am discussing. Research demonstrates that professional organization involvement predicts better post-graduate outcomes (Jackson et al., 2024; Simpfenderfer et al., 2024). We also know that first-generation students enter higher education with less social capital (Sudbrock et al., 2024; Ives & Castillo-Montoya, 2020). Research also suggests that structured environments improve transition and belonging for first-generation students (Inkelas et al., 2006; Soria & Cole, 2023). Lastly, we know how a sense of belonging and confidence in a space can affect engagement for first-generation students (Sudbrock et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2024; Thornhill et al., 2023).

Despite all of this research, there are still some key gaps in our knowledge. For one, how do first-generation students themselves define the culture of professional and career-oriented organizations? Do first-generation students view these organizations as accessible to them? Lastly, how do institutions' structural communication systems shape organizational awareness for first-generation students? Most studies rely on quantitative data, not the lived experience of first-generation students and their interpretation of the culture they have experienced at their higher education institution. These lived experiences provide information regarding whether these professional spaces are inclusive or exclusionary and how they are so. This gap in knowledge is

important because how these spaces are perceived by first-generation students reflects first-generation students' participation in these spaces. This is the gap in knowledge I address in my research.

To analyze engagement beyond that of an individual, this research uses the lens of Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory (Demetriou et al., 2017; Guy-Evans, 2025; Bronfenbrenner, 1981). This framework for analysis views development as occurring within systems that are nested within other systems, ranging from one's immediate peers to the institution's policies and structures in which the individual is. The framework also indicates that an individual's growth requires increasingly complex interaction within their environment. Professional and career-oriented organizations' accessibility is largely within the exosystem, where an institution's structural design shapes opportunity, so much of my research will be focused on there.

III. Research Approach

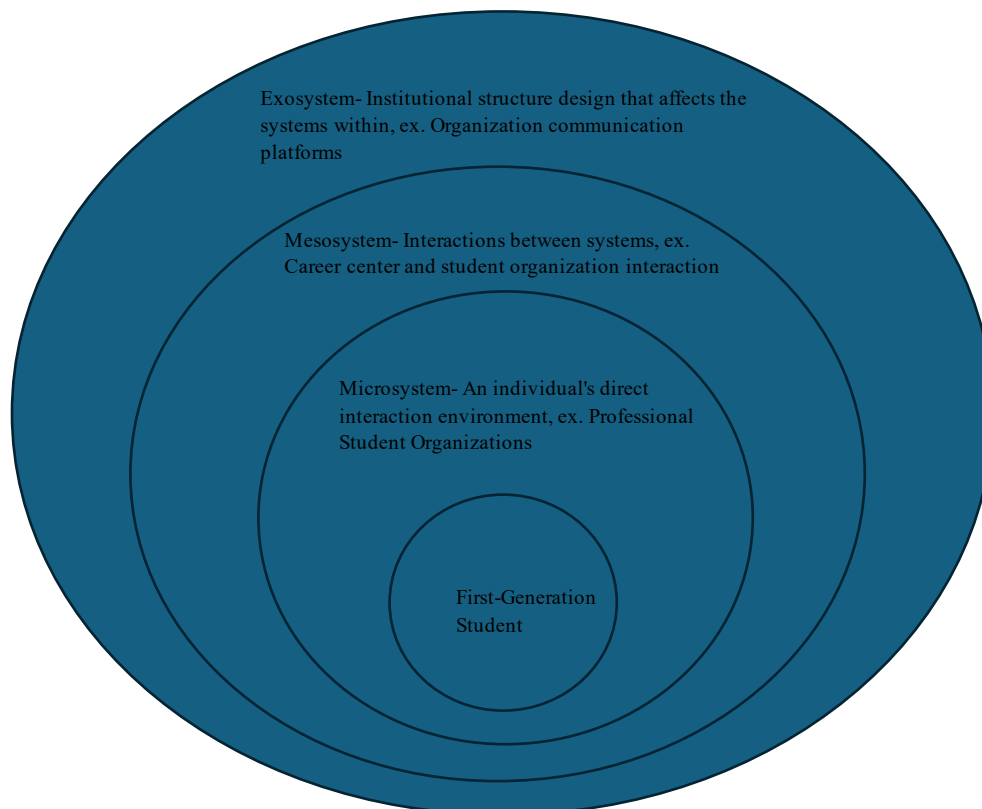
Previous literature, relying on large surveys, administrative data, and outcome measures, does a thorough job of demonstrating structural patterns. These methods are important in creating the knowledge landscape we have today but fail to capture how the first-generation students themselves perceive professional organizations. Based on this intended purpose, I selected analytical frameworks capable of analyzing complex social environments, which is why I chose Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system and Putnam's social capital.

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological system is my primary framework to analyze my data. Due to the nested layers of one's surroundings, they interact with multiple levels of the environment at the same time. The five systems in Bronfenbrenner's ecological system are, from innermost to

outermost, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Guy-Evans, 2025; Bronfenbrenner, 1981) and, while they are all important, for this research paper I will be narrowing my focus on just the first three. Analyzing the microsystem brings me to another aspect of Bronfenbrenner's theory. Developmental activities are behavioral activities that can involve a single step or a progression of steps (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Demetriou et al., 2017). They are directly interacting with the individual in the center of the system, so they are in the microsystem. Next, analyzing the mesosystem demonstrates the complex nature of nested systems. An individual must interact with the environment in a progressively more complex way to continue to develop (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Demetriou et al., 2017). The interconnected nature of the mesosystem creates the necessary complex relationships that can facilitate growth. Lastly, as was previously mentioned, the exosystem level is the most important in my research because it is the level where higher institutions' structures are.

Figure 1

Bioecological Systems Affecting First-Generation Students in Professional Organizations



My secondary framework is Putnam's social capital. Social capital refers to networks and relationships that connect individuals and allow them to access resources (Putnam, 2000). Unlike human capital which exists within someone, social capital exists within relationships and cannot exist in a single individual (Putnam, 2000). Due to criticism, Putnam expanded on his theory in Putnam (2000) by defining bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding capital is the close relationships we form to get by in the day-to-day. Bonding relationships are primarily to provide stability, while bridging capital is the broader network we use to advance our standing. Bridging relationships are primarily to provide opportunities. Professional and career-oriented organizations provide an opportunity to develop bridging capital by growing students' networks within their profession. This framework allows participation in career-oriented organizations to be framed as network growth opportunity structure that builds bridging capital. Which would mean unequal access to this opportunity structure would create unequal access to career growth opportunities.

It should be noted Putnam's framework experienced criticism. Leonard (2004) expresses that Putnam's framework is too optimistic and ignores how social capital can exclude. Even in close-knit communities in Belfast reciprocity was not guaranteed. Rather, people would help those they felt could help them. Furthermore, when business owners bridged outward they were forced to raise prices to cover new expenses and by doing so they priced out their local community. This calls into question Putnam's idea that when members of a bonding social group bridge out it will positively affect the whole group (Leonard, 2004). It is clear that going from bonding to bridging can benefit individuals and not the whole group.

Despite its flaws, Putnam's social capital demonstrates the structural disadvantages that first-generation students face. First-generation students lack bridging capital to institutional

networks and the professional resources they connect to. Using social capital shifts the focus away from individuals toward structural barriers.

For the data collection in my research, I conducted semi-structured interviews with first-generation students in a higher education institution. I interviewed four first-generation UVA students, one second-year, one third-year, and two fourth-years, using the list of questions in Appendix A. Participants were selected because they could speak to how the first-generation status shapes awareness, access, and confidence in career-oriented CIOs. The sample included students with different levels of involvement so the study could analyze the differences between the students experiences. They were recruited through an existing peer contact and the snowball method, a system of asking those you interview for more contacts. Those interviewed will vary in their engagement with professional or career-oriented organizations. The semi-structured interview format allowed participants to describe experiences in their own words. My questions were specifically targeted at capturing perceptions of career-oriented organizations' accessibility, culture, and awareness barriers. The overall goal of choosing the format of structured questions and open responses was to allow for both consistency and depth in my interviewee's answers. Though less common similar qualitative approaches have been used in prior research to capture perceptions of belonging and institutional accessibility (Demetriou et al., 2017).

After my ten question interviews covering area definition, student involvement, CIO discovery, prior knowledge, CIO access, confidence, perceived culture, feeling of belonging, institutional support, and student equity I analyzed the answers I received to find central themes. Specifically, I am interested in barriers to awareness, available recruitment channels, belonging, cultural alignment, and confidence in career environment. I then analyzed the themes using the frameworks I outlined. Bronfenbrenner's to analyze how institutional structures shaped

awareness and participation and Putnam's to analyze how these organizations are affecting first-generation students bridging capital growth. By combining the bioecological systems theory with the social capital theory, I can see barriers to engagement as structural features of institutional design, rather than individual choice, that limit first-generation students' opportunity environment.

IV. Results

For first-generation students' entry into the opportunity ecosystem surrounding professional organizations poses a stark knowledge obstacle. Prior to entering the University of Virginia most of those that I interviewed did not know about the professional and career-oriented organization space. Those that did, were not aware of the urgency surrounding that space. The action of first awareness on grounds, the colloquial word for the University of Virginia's campus, was a clash of the University's exosystem and the first-generation students' bonding relationships. Around half of those interviewed were made aware of the career-oriented organizations through attending the club fair at the beginning of the year. The fair was made to connect students with clubs supported by the institution. The other half were made aware through bonding relationships, consistent with Putnam's theory (Putnam, 2000). The biggest complaint by those interviewed was the lack of active assistance in place in the institutional systems. While the club fair connected those I interviewed with the career-oriented organizations, they quickly felt they were not prepared to either belong or gain access to the spaces. The consistent mention of only joining clubs after hearing about it through peer networks and the lack of active help from the University, mentioned multiple times, makes it clear that there is a clear weak point in the University's exosystem.

After becoming aware of them, bringing career-oriented organizations into their microsystem was dependent on the perceived culture of the organization, fostered by the organization; still, each student I interviewed had participated in one of these organizations. The two organizational trends that appeared in my interviews were between closed, corporate organizations that have limited spots and require applying, and open organizations that have no structural barrier to entry. Those whom I interviewed often indicated that application-based organizations seemed to expect previous knowledge that they did not have. This perceived accessibility barrier acted as a filtering mechanism in individual students' microsystems. These types of organizations require prior knowledge and reward those coming to the University with higher social capital that makes them familiar with norms. On the other hand, open organizations were seen as much more accessible, especially those that sit at the intersection of a profession and a culture, like a club for Latino students in Commerce. The direct interaction with these organizations, both positive and negative, seemed to consistently impact the first-generation students' microsystem because the students I interviewed all had experiences with professional organizations.

For most of those I interviewed, they were able to find belonging, which in turn increased their confidence in both their personal abilities and their chances of employment. For these students, the complex interactions with their peers and their career-oriented organizations in their mesosystem allowed for growth and increased bridging capital through network growth. On the other hand, for those I interviewed who had not become confident in their career-oriented club, their participation decreased, and their confidence did not increase. Their lack of confidence contributed to consequences that may have affected their career outcomes, like skipping application periods in their field. The duality of these first-generation students lived experiences

shows how confidence in professional spaces is not necessarily pre-existing and can be built through participation.

For those I interviewed, it is clear that the institutional design of the exosystem shaped opportunity access throughout their time at the university. While those I interviewed praised the club fair, they also expressed the overwhelming world of clubs at the University of Virginia with problems like the high quantity of emails you receive. I see this as stress caused by decentralized communication. After the club fair, the lack of guidance and bridging capital accessible to the first-generation students caused multiple students to not interact with the career-oriented organizations until later in their college lives when they had built up their bridging capital through classes. For those that I interviewed, the problems within their exosystem were clear; however, solutions were much harder to think of. Most first-generation students I interviewed felt they had no answer to the question “What structural changes at the institutional level do you think would make these organizations more equitable and accessible for first-generation students?” and those who did answer focused more on expanding current solutions, like spaces focused on helping first-generation students, rather than novel solutions.

From my interviews, the first-generation students' engagement is shaped heavily by structural factors, rather than individual choice, affecting their entire bioecological system. In their microsystem, unequal awareness leads to an uneven initial exposure across the student population, which shapes first-generation students' perceptions of the spaces before they attempt to participate. These perceptions naturally influence participation negatively, which affects the students' confidence and career outcomes. Institutional work in the exosystem can act as a driver that can artificially shape access to enforce better equity down the line. This can be seen by the positive effect of the club fair mentioned consistently throughout my interviews.

V. Conclusion

The institutional structures of the exosystem shape awareness, which shapes access, which shapes engagement, reinforcing existing inequalities. This cycle demonstrates how a lack of robust opportunity structures or even passive opportunity structures is insufficient in creating a more equitable space at a higher education institution. Based on my research, I would suggest two major changes in the opportunity ecosystem at the University of Virginia. First, I would recommend a central CIO operational platform to reduce the reliance on informal peer networks. Secondly, based on the interview answers received, I would recommend a more active approach to first-generation support in the extracurricular career-building environments. This could include encouraging closed clubs to create spaces for first-generation students who may have less bridging capital than their peers, as well as offering assistance focused on kindly pushing first-generation students into these spaces. I put forth that improving access is not just a matter of increasing opportunity but also restructuring how opportunities are communicated and experienced. Institutions that rely on passive systems reinforce inequities even if the opportunities technically exist.

It is often that responsibility is placed on individuals for the outcomes of their education outside of the classroom, but doing so ignores the nested bioecological systems theory that Bronfenbrenner proposed, where one's microsystem is inside of the institutions' exosystem, placing the institutional design with at least partial responsibility. My research focused on a small number of first-generation students at the University of Virginia, but I think it is important that research similar to mine continues to empower the perceptions of first-generation students in higher education. Opportunity ecosystems must be intentionally designed to support equity because, without intentional design, opportunity systems do not

remain neutral; they reproduce existing inequity through differences in awareness and accessibility.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

1. In your own words, how would you describe a professional or career-oriented student organization, and what do you think their purpose is?
2. Are you currently involved in any professional or career-oriented organizations on grounds? What drove that decision?
3. How did you first become aware that these organizations existed at UVA — did that come through the university formally, through peers, or somewhere else?
4. Before coming to UVA, how much did you know about the role professional organizations play in career development? Did that awareness change once you arrived?
5. When you thought about joining one of these organizations, what made it feel accessible or inaccessible to you as a first-generation student?
6. How did involvement, or the lack of it, affect your confidence in navigating career opportunities and professional spaces on grounds?
7. How would you describe the culture of these organizations? Did it feel like a space that reflected your values and motivations, or did it feel foreign to you?
8. Thinking about UVA's systems — things like advising, orientation, curriculum, or communication — how did they help or hurt your ability to engage with these organizations?
9. Reflecting on your experience, what information or resources do you wish had been made available to you earlier, and through what channels?
10. What structural changes at the institutional level do you think would make these organizations more equitable and accessible for first-generation students?

*Interviews were semi-structured, allowing follow-up questions when participants introduced relevant experiences.