The Consequences of Revealing First-Generational Status

First-generation college students—students whose parents do not have four-year college degrees—now have unprecedented opportunities to attend American colleges and universities. Although their struggles and experiences in higher education are well documented, much remains unknown about what happens when they compete for opportunities in the general labor market. In this paper, we investigate the consequences when they disclose to potential employers that they are the first person in their family to go to college. We first examined the intuitions of first-generation students ($N = 100$) about disclosure; we find that most of them would feel comfortable revealing to prospective employers that they are the first person in their family to go to college, because they believe that disclosure of this information would give them a boost. We then conducted a large-scale randomized resume audit study ($N = 1,785$) to examine what happens to prospective applicants when they do reveal that they are the first in their family to go to college. We find that contrary to the intuition of first-generation students, applicants were less likely to get callbacks when they disclosed that they are the first person in their family to go to college. A large-scale follow-up experiment ($N = 5,013$) revealed that evaluators tended to see first-generation students as less competent as compared with their non-disclosing counterparts, especially when those evaluators were personally inclined to believe in social determinism: that a person’s social character is shaped permanently, lastingly, and profoundly by their upbringing and social background. Overall, these studies suggest an irony about class dynamics in the United States: Although well-meaning Americans purport to love the idea of the individual who achieves success through bootstrapping, in practice they may be far less accepting, in part, because observers tend to believe that the effects of growing up in disadvantaged backgrounds are permanent and long-lasting.