
CASE STUDY ONE. NEGOTIATING SPACE AND RELATIONSHIPS AS A FIRST-GENERATION, WORKING-CLASS COLLEGE STUDENT

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Institutional Context

Limestone University is a medium-sized, private university located in the northeastern U.S., classified by Carnegie as a baccalaureate college, and known for its strong liberal arts focus. The campus retains its historic, New England charm, while also boasting some updated campus facilities and maintaining beautifully manicured grounds.

Limestone enrolls 8,000 students from all 50 states and 15 countries. Approximately 48% of students receive financial aid packages, with 13% receiving Pell Grants to offset the cost of attendance (COA), nearing \$47,000 per year. The majority of students have parents able to pay for COA out-of-pocket, which is one indicator that the majority of students are from wealthy family backgrounds.

Individuals Who Are Central to the Case

- Dakota (he/him/his) is a first-year, first-generation, working-class college student, who identifies as Native. He's attending Limestone on a Pell Grant and a half-tuition scholarship requires him to have at least a 3.2 GPA. He also has taken out student loans and works 18 hours/week in one of Limestone's dining halls.
- Cameron (he/him/his) is a first-year, upper middle-class student who identifies as Black. His family members are Limestone alumni and paid his cost of attendance on their credit card for points toward their family's winter break vacation. Rather than working, he receives a monthly allowance from his family.
- Sawyer (she/her/hers) is a first-generation, middle-class student who identifies as Biracial. She is President of the First-Generation Student Union and a third-year student at the university.
- Riley (he/him/his) is a white man from a working-class background. He is the Residence Hall Director (RHD) for the building where Dakota and Cameron reside. This is his second year at Limestone and his first full-time position in higher education.

Scenario

Dakota always dreamed of attending Limestone University. He knew it would be challenging both academically and socially, but he was excited for the new adventure, the different people, and future career opportunities. Dakota met Cameron through the admissions Facebook group and they decided to live together as a way to expand their social networks. They divvied up the different items needed for their room, including the minifridge, which Dakota knew just where to find at a bargain.

On move-in weekend, Dakota packs up his car and drives himself to Limestone to move into the residence hall. When he arrives at the room Cameron's parents and two siblings are already in the room hanging posters on the wall. Dakota is excited to show Cameron his \$10 thrift store minifridge find, saving them \$65 from the standard university housing price! As Dakota carries the used minifridge into the room, Cameron and his family have a visible reaction and judgingly inquire about the functionality of the fridge based on its exterior condition. Dakota feels belittled; Cameron and his family obviously do not approve. This is the first of several social class differences between Dakota and Cameron.

Dakota faces concerns about having enough money to pay for tuition and fees and starts working as a food server in the dining hall through a work-study position. When Cameron and other members of their floor see Dakota working in the dining hall, they won't acknowledge him. Instead, they pull their caps lower and quickly move through the line.

Because of the clash of social classes Dakota is facing with his roommate, he questions if he truly belongs at Limestone. Then, one day, Dakota hears about the First-Generation Student Union (FGSU). He is unfamiliar with the term "first-generation college student", but decides to attend a meeting. During the meeting FGSU members discuss a new guide they are developing called "Not Rich at Limestone University: Tips by Students". After the meeting, Dakota has the opportunity to talk with the FGSU President, Sawyer, and decides to get more involved in the organization.

Dakota reaches out to Sawyer to get some advice on navigating his relationship with Cameron and other more affluent students on campus. Sawyer shares that she had a similar experience with her upper-class roommate and offers some tips on how she navigated her first year at Limestone University. Sawyer encourages Dakota to talk with his Residence Hall Director, Riley. Although Dakota knows it would be a good idea to talk to Riley, he believes he can handle the situation on his own.

One week later, Cameron and two friends are hanging out in Dakota and Cameron's room while Dakota is completing homework. They invite Dakota to go to dinner off campus, but he politely declines because he does not have any money. Cameron remarks, "Yeah, I hear you. I'm a poor college

student, too”. Dakota loses his cool and stomps out of the room and down to Riley’s Hall Director office. Dakota tells Riley about the challenges he’s been encountering with Cameron. Riley just listens until Dakota breaks into tears and can no longer continue sharing. Riley suggests the three of them sit down to discuss what has been going on and to figure out what might be some common ground on which the two can build a roommate relationship.

Guiding Questions for Faculty, Staff, and Students

1. What are the various inclusion and social justice-related dynamics in this case study?
 2. What self-work would you need to do before and while navigating dynamics similar to the ones in this case study (e.g., class, race, first-generation college student status)?
 3. In the role of Riley, what short-term and long-term strategies would you use to effectively navigate this situation? What individual (e.g., class, race, first-generation college student status) and university (e.g., policy, practice, culture, unwritten rules) dynamics may impact such strategies?
 4. What identity development theory and related literature would you use to navigate this situation?
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