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Experiences of a First-Generation College Student: Support in Schools and Recognizing Diversity

Abstract. This paper describes the experience of a first-generation college student, as well as the challenges faced by the first-generation college student population. The author examines ways that being first-generation has affected her education, and ways that institutions can support first-generation students. These challenges are also explained to be representative of a larger social context of the purpose and goals of education.

Some will say that simply being raised in the United States is a recipe for success. The freedom to speak, to learn, the right to education, are things that many take for granted. Why would someone not go to college? It is a rite of passage to attend higher education – kindergarten graduation quickly becomes high school orientation, and suddenly you are in a cap and gown graduating on your high school football field. Then, you're touring all the most beautiful and prestigious colleges with your mother and father. And you get to choose wherever you want to go. And study whatever you like. And you get to dorm away from home. Just like your brothers and sisters and parents who went to college and have white-collar jobs and their college degrees hanging on the wall of their office in a gold-lined frame. And after four years you will have one too.

I would say that described life is the American dream – but more of a dream than it is American. The reality is America is founded on immigrants of families from countries around the world, children of families raised on one parent or no parents. Children are expected to get straight A's in school when their parents did not finish high school. First-generation students come from families of hairstylists, plumbers, electricians, landscapers, and the list goes on. I am proud to be a first-generation student. We, like first-generation college students, do not have gold-lined degrees framed on the wall. We have our father's plumbing uniforms and boots throughout the house and the lingering smell of the hair salon. Growing up in a suburban town, I would spend a lot of my summer with my dad in his plumbing truck or the waxing room of my mom's hair salon doing homework. Many of my friends, whose parents were college-educated, went to a summer camp.

I loved school, and not just because I liked to learn. As an only child, it was my place to socialize. My parents both were masters of their trades, and my dad worked hard and long days. My mom did as well, but I was thankful for the days she had off and could spend with me. When she worked late, I stayed at school and did my homework as some of my friends were picked up by their nannies. And on Saturdays, they got to stay home with their parents because the schools, the doctor's offices, corporate offices, and law offices their parents worked at were closed. My Saturdays were spent by my Grandma's as that was both of my parents' busiest and longest days. My grandma lived in my mother's childhood home in Paterson, New Jersey. I loved going by my grandma's on Saturdays as I learned how to cook and bake some of my favorite foods. I would

spend time at the dining room table doing homework from the week or watching whatever my favorite show was at the time. My mom had told me her story growing up with four siblings, and the calmness and ability to focus I felt at that dining room table was something she never experienced. My mom enjoyed school, but with three older siblings' home in a small space, she could never find the time to focus. I spoke with her recently about this, and for context, Paterson is a very urban city. It can be extremely dangerous in parts, especially for my mom growing up as a young girl. I asked why she never went to the library if she couldn't study at home. The library was downtown, she said, in the most dangerous part of town. Her siblings and parents were too busy to drive her, and it wasn't safe enough to walk. So, unfortunately, my mom was not able to put as much focus into her school as she wanted to. Instead, she began focusing on working as she attended Passaic County Technical Institute for high school. My mom wanted to go to nursing school, but her parents did not have the finances to send her, and applying for loans was too complicated. My mom loved hairdressing, but from when I was a little girl it was her dream for me to get a college education.

I am grateful for my parents, I am proud of my background, and I had a wonderful childhood. I was never envious of the wealth, careers, or lifestyle my friend's parents had. By describing my experiences in comparison to theirs I am conveying what it means to be a first-generation student and how it is more than coming from a family of non-college attenders. Their blue-collar jobs didn't make me feel less than my white-collar counterparts. They taught me determination and the value of my efforts and self-worth. Everything they did was to support me, not to live up to the expectation of society. But there was no denying that my counterparts that were products of a college-educated family had a closer definition of the "American Dream". My mom had specific goals for me, like wanting me to enjoy school and eventually go to college. She did everything she could to encourage my education, and from an early age, she would read to me and help me with my homework. But it is important to recognize that I was fortunate as a first-generation student. Although I did face challenges as a first-generation student, I had two parents who worked hard, made a good living, and were always able to provide for me. Their parents immigrated from Italy long ago, so cultural and language adjustments were not something that I had to struggle with. As educators, there is always going to be a diverse classroom of students. Educators need to acknowledge these students, those that are children of college graduates and those that are first-generation, and the specific experiences of those students.

When it was time for me to begin applying to colleges, I felt lost. My friends were talking about the SAT (a standardized test that is required for college applications) prep classes they attended, their parents doing the FAFSA (a federal student financial aid application) and applying through Common App (online portal used for college applications). All these things sounded like a different language. I went home and told my parents I needed to do all these things after speaking with my guidance counselor. From meeting with my guidance counselor, I at least learned what those words *meant*, but still not much of an idea of how to *do* them. My parents wanted to help me with applications, however, they truly did not know how to. After researching on my own and with the assistance of family friends, my applications and FAFSA were all completed. I couldn't help but think of how much easier the process was for my friends whose parents were college-educated. But I had parents who were supportive of me and wanted me to attend college; I just had to figure some of it out on my own. Not all first-generation students are as fortunate as I was to be able to navigate the application process. Schools need to support first-generation students throughout high school to

prepare them for college applications. From my own experience, a guidance counselor who was a first-generation college student themselves may have been better suited to understand what resources I needed at the time. All high school advisors need to be knowledgeable on how to support diverse student populations. Professor Alecea Standlee of Sociology at Gettysburg College explains the importance of continuing this support throughout college, emphasizing the importance of a mandatory introduction to college class for all freshmen, explaining that “first-generation college students can’t rely on advice from college-educated parents about navigating college life. They are usually not familiar with the details of college life, academic resources, and social expectations, so they can need guidance” (Standlee). Providing such guidance gives first-generation students important information about the way college works and the resources available to them. Institutions cannot assume that all students understand how college works, and need to create an environment where all students can succeed. This introduction to college classes can teach vital study skills and help form relationships between students with similar experiences (Standlee). The summer before coming to Seton Hall, I was invited to be part of the Gen 1 organization for first-generation college students and was assigned an academic advisor who was a first-generation college student herself. From this organization and our weeklong summer activities, I was able to feel connected not only with other first-generation students but also with my advisor. As Standlee explains, these resources are vital to supporting first-generation students. The importance of having professors and advisors who are first-generation played a significant role in my adjustment to college.

As a first-generation female student going into STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields) I felt intimidated by other students who already seemed to have an advantage in the field. However, my first semester my chemistry professor told us right away how he was a first-generation student and his journey. When he told us that, I felt that I was in the right place and was capable of being successful in college. I admired his honesty and dedication, and he is still a professor that motivates me to keep trying my best. My own experience reveals how important educators that share the unique experience of being a first-generation student can make an immensely significant impact on a student’s motivation, adjustment, and ability to succeed.

I am studying Biology and Secondary Education not only because of my passion for science and teaching but to inspire diverse learners and first-generation students to achieve greatness. Supporting first-generation and immigrant students is especially important to society’s involvement to appreciating the talents and abilities of these students. My background as a first-generation student is especially important to my identity as a future teacher and I look forward to using my experience to inspire my future students.

References

Standlee, A. (2019), April 11. *Policies and practices to help first-generation college students succeed*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2019/04/11/policies-and-practices-help-first-generation-college-students-succeed-opinion>.