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# First-Gen Voices: Creative and Critical Narratives on the First- Generation College Experience

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## Butterflies

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On this trip abroad for first generation college students, I have met new people, enriched relationships with others, and followed through on travel goals with one of my closest friends. However, I must admit that I have reflected more on my first generation college experience more over the last few days than my entire four years at Loyola Marymount University.

Let me explain: my father dropped out of Dorsey High School in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. He claims it was because of the redundancy in subject matter. He felt his options were to listen to the pointless factoids of the War of 1812 for the 5<sup>th</sup> time in his academic career or to leave. He chose the latter. My mother, however, does have a Bachelor's of Arts in Political Science from Fisk University, a historically Black college from which she graduated almost forty years ago. An obvious stark contrast from the PWI (Primarily White Institution) that I was accepted to in 2012. As an avid frequenter of LMU's Academic Resource Center, I was advised by its resident mentor/scholar/fairy godmother, Dr. La'Tonya Reese Miles, that the First To Go experience was one I would be able to relate to.

She wasn't wrong. I had many good friends who identified as first generation college students. I have a deep passion for justice in social, political, economic, and racial spheres. I definitely related to those of similar economic backgrounds, "too rich" for a Pell Grant, but "too poor" for a reasonable financial aid package. I commuted from home, dealing with the daily dualities that presented themselves: fight with dad, final, mom said I came home too late, I'll send her a picture of myself in the library at 3 a.m. to assure her that there are no frat boys with cocaine around me... Well maybe there's one but he has a final too and if he doesn't pass this class, his parents are going to take away his Porsche and make him drive the Benz like a fucking peasant... and this time, they're serious.

And nothing against *Frattie* or the wealthy at LMU. "Some of my best friends are rich" (I say with vocal fry), and simultaneously sweet and genuine, and some are even first-gen—children of South America's elite who are the first to graduate from an American university, daughters of immigrants who fled religious persecution and sacrificed all to grow extremely prosperous businesses. These are First To Go students too, but relating them has its difficulties. While my car collapsed, they purchased shiny new ones. The unpaid internships they worked had little impact on them financially; my parents wondered why I wouldn't get a real job and stop working for free. The breaks that I spent at home in bed watching TV and working annoying part time jobs, they spent at one of many vacation houses in exotic locations.

But I mention "first-gen" to a legacy student, and he equates this term with financial hardship, a *darker* background, and a working, middle-class lifestyle. He equates it to someone like me. I mention my affiliation with the Black Lives Matter movement and you think that I am oppressed. I mention why I missed

class again for a doctor's appointment and you think that I am in pain. I voice my concerns and frustrations at LMU and it evokes your pity, "poor baby, poor girl, poor Adinah" (I get it you think I'm poor).

Despite this, there is no universal first-gen experience, just as there is no universal Black experience, or Mexican, or Jewish, Muslim, poor, anime-lovers, flying-spaghetti monster believing, tacky, pajama-wearing in public, drunk karaoke experience. My experiences are not rooted in oppression, pain, or sorrow. My life has surely contained some of these elements, but has overwhelmingly been filled with joy, laughter, admiration, and bouts of being comfortable and uncomfortable.

I look back on my high school days and try to remember why I cried so much, cursed myself, and wanted to be anyone but me. I can't remember. I remember that I felt pain, but I can't bring those feelings back up. What I do recall is the belly laughs, the inside jokes, the days I laughed until I cried, and when I felt most excited and at peace. I don't remember the heartbreak; I remember the love. I remember the butterflies.