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

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Epiphanies

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*Success is my only motherfucking
option; failure's not. Mom, I love
you, but this trailer's got to go.
I cannot grow old in Salem's lot.
So here I go, it's my shot. Feet fail
me not. This may be the only
opportunity that I got.*
—“Lose Yourself,” Eminem

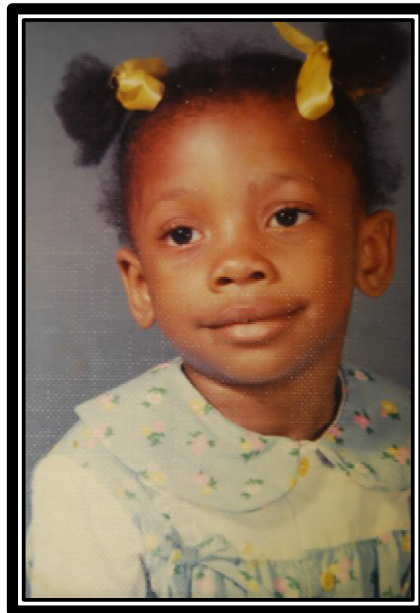
By the end of my first semester of college, I knew that I was different from the other students. It wasn't just because I was a black student at a predominantly white school (the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), although that was part of it. The day after George Bush was elected, swastikas appeared around campus. Later, a group of white guys urinated alongside a Delta Sigma Theta sorority pledge line. I never saw these incidents myself, but I heard about them, and it was enough to make me believe that I was experiencing racism directly. I was reminded of the picture that my friend Megan jokingly drew in my high school yearbook: me hanging from a noose in a tree.

Region also played a factor. My roots are in Alexandria, Virginia, so technically, I am from the South. But I quickly learned that being in the South is not the same as being Southern. My first night in college, I called my grandmother to find out what a pig pickin' is. I was called a “Yankee” to my face. By black people.

No, as the fall semester drew to a close, I knew something else was up. Mom had quit her job to launch her own business, so while fall was paid, spring tuition (and beyond) was less certain. Money was tight, and I was on my own. I did have a work-study job on campus, which gave me some pocket change, and oftentimes I only had \$5.00 to last me through the week. I got creative when it came to buying meals at the dining halls. I discovered which building had the best grilled cheese sandwiches and I ate them—plus fries!—as a regular dinner. I opted out of social events because I either a) didn't have enough money to go or b) couldn't figure out how I would eat once I got there. For the duration of my college experience, I walked a delicate tight rope, and I held my breath every semester, as I tried to figure out how I would pay for school. I worked on campus and off—struggling and juggling to pay rent and to buy my books. My mother was my biggest cheerleader and had drilled in me that I was smart and capable of figuring things out. Many years later, she confessed that she thought my intellect was enough to earn a full scholarship, so she didn't save money for college.

I certainly would have felt less crazy had I known that I simply was a first-generation college student, that the challenges I was facing were common among those who were the pioneers in their families. I was going to college not just for myself but for my mother whose educational pursuits were put on hold when she became pregnant with me during high school; for my Uncle Ronnie, who went to Vietnam as a teenager and returned with a drug habit that plagued him the rest of his life; for the rest of the black kids in school (Beaufort Brown, Moosey, Cassandra and Naquita) who did not have the same opportunities that I did.

For this project, I simply asked other people: *when did you realize that you were a first-generation college student?* Was there a particular moment? Did you have an epiphany? What follows are a fraction of the responses that I received. Some people submitted one or two brief sentences. Others wrote elaborate narratives. I also encouraged people to include a photograph that they felt best reflected their submission. It is my hope that these stories contribute to the rich tapestry of the first-generation college experience and make other people feel less crazy.



About my photo: I was told early and often by several family members that I am smart. This made me feel special and like I was an emissary from my family sent to school to learn all of its secrets and to obtain like it's a weapon, a samurai sword. This photo of me at age three symbolizes the hope and aspirations of the Rease family. Lady T, the Golden Child.

My mother dropped me off at the dorms a couple of days before my first class. I remember looking into her face and seeing a look of sadness in it. I knew in that instance that my life would never be the same and that I was crossing a barrier that no one in my family had ever experienced. I literally feel like that day was the saddest and happiest moment of my life. I would never be the same, and my mother knew that.

~ **Melissa Robinson, stay at home mom**



I knew in the 8th/9th grade that my parents never went to college to get a bachelor's degree. I knew that both had gone through formal and informal vocational school and had taken some English language classes at college in order to learn the language. I knew that they valued education a lot, but back then starting a family and making a living was priority for both families. However, I always called it, "My parents never attended college"; I never termed myself as a "first-generation college student." I always saw it from the third person--it was my parents' story, not mine.

When I was applying for college, I remember asking my counselor if I could check the box "first-generation college student" because I wasn't sure if that applied to me. My mom took classes in college, but never obtained a degree, so did that still make me a first-generation college student? Thankfully, my counselor was amazing and he said, "Of course!" He encouraged me to check the box.

I didn't really understand the term, though, until I started school and became a first-gen college student. There were many obstacles: trying to explain to my parents why I had to stay late hours on campus; how classes worked; why I would "work for free" on a research project. I think a lot of the professors I encountered in the beginning year were insensitive to the fact that I had NO IDEA what I was doing. But after a year or two, I embraced the term, and realized that I had to fight a harder battle. It seemed that everyone else knew what they were doing, but through the [UCLA Academic Advancement Program] peer counselors, the [Ronald E.] McNair [Research Scholars Program], and my sorority, I realized that I wasn't alone.

~ **Ani Khachoyan, health clinician**



I realized I was a first-generation college student during my first year of college. While most of my classmates had the luxury of relying on their siblings and parents for advice regarding the high school to college transition and navigating the bureaucracy of college processes, I found myself having to find answers on my own. My first-generation identity was particularly salient during the week of my first Winter Quarter registration on my own. During that week leading up to registration, I was completely lost and confused with figuring out how to fix all the issues that would prevent my registering for courses if left unresolved: financial aid concerns, degree planning, web enrollment, etc. At that point, during the peak of my frustration, I knew that this was only the start to what would be a very challenging road to navigate on my own.

~ **Dr. Nam Ung, university administrator**



I realized it on a practical level when I was investigating colleges as a high school student and neither parent was equipped to help me make a decision because neither one had ever been to college. I realized the bigger effects of it probably not until I got to law school and met so many people whose parents were professionals—doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc. It struck me then that although I always thought upward mobility was possible just based on the people I met at UCLA, and the decent number of people who were first-gen, in reality, being a first-gen college student is an incredible feat and multiplied by a million if that person is able to go on to graduate school. It wasn't necessarily a light bulb moment so much as it was a process of coming to terms with what my status meant over the course of my first year at Harvard Law School.

~ **Trisha Howard Anaiades, J.D.**



My mom went to community college, so as for the very, very beginning—sign up for [Extended Opportunity Programs and Services], go to financial aid—she advised me. As soon as I was ready to choose a class or organize my schedule, I was all alone. I didn't know about choosing majors, or the differences between my major at the community college and the university I wanted to transfer to. I went to a counselor and that further confused me. Then studying . . . that was an entirely different story. I placed in college level English and Calculus (never took pre-cal, so I was terrified).

None of my classes had African-American students (my comfort zone)—that further identified my first-gen divide. NO ONE ELSE WAS THERE.

~ Tremeal Bradford



I wasn't enrolled in any of the programs designed for first-generation students because my mother always said I wasn't first-gen because my father went to school in Pakistan. She felt that it would make me feel like I was at a disadvantage; ironically it kept me from accessing resources.

I never received any specialized services but had I been able to, they would have been very helpful. I had to do much of the navigating on my own simply because my parents didn't know any of the processes for classes/majors, housing, counseling, scholarships, grad school, etc.

~ Sikander Nasim Iqbal, independent business owner



The realization of being a first-generation college student hit me the hardest over an argument about financial aid with my parents. Tears on my face, I yelled at my parents, “I shouldn’t have to explain this to you. You should be helping me! And why didn’t you save money for my college education?” I was learning how to navigate the difficult financial aid language on my own and at the same time how to translate it into Spanish, so both my parents could comprehend. I was 17 and didn’t even own a debit card.

How was I supposed to know what a loan was, yet alone the difference between a subsidized and unsubsidized loan? My parents were trying as much as they could, but I realized that I would have to take a lot more initiative as a first-generation college student.

~ Alma Flores, doctoral student



The first epiphany I had regarding something being different was my first day of school. My parents at the time did not speak English, and therefore neither did I. They might or might have not informed me that at school I would be speaking a whole new language when I started kindergarten.

I felt as if my mother was abandoning me as she dropped me off of school. Then I got put in a chair in a room with other kids that looked similar to me. It was a predominantly Latino classroom. Then in walks our instructor for the day. Blonde hair, blue eyes and pale skin. I remember my first reaction was thinking she was sooo beautiful. Like a Disney princess.

But then she opened her mouth.

This strange language started coming out of her mouth. I felt paralyzed. I was watching her speak and smile in slow motion. It was English.

I looked over to the kid next to me. He looked like he could be my brother. I asked him what was going on. He opened his mouth and the same language came out!

To make a long story short, I didn't know then I was first-generation, but I do remember wondering why most in the class knew English and I didn't.

~ Nelson Castro, NYC school director and citizen of the world



Nearly every day of my undergraduate years, I was reminded that what I was doing was unprecedented in my family. From the financial aid process to furnishing a dorm, my family and I had little idea what we were doing. I was confronted by this reality even more when I made friends with Mexican students whose parents had degrees, an experience I could not comprehend.

But there was no other moment that made me feel more first-gen than the three times I walked across the stage to receive my degrees and then met my smiling family after the ceremonies, my dad's smile being the biggest. A lifelong learner and naturalized citizen, my dad dreamt of earning a degree in electrical engineering. But life happened and the need to feed his family of seven became more important. He helped me as much as he could, but when he couldn't help me with my homework anymore, he created a nightly ritual of wiping down the kitchen table, sharpening my pencils, switching out the light bulb, and propping my book on a stand. He may not have created a path to college for me to follow, but, just as importantly, he helped me pave my own.

~ Prof. Larissa Mercado, Fresno State University

