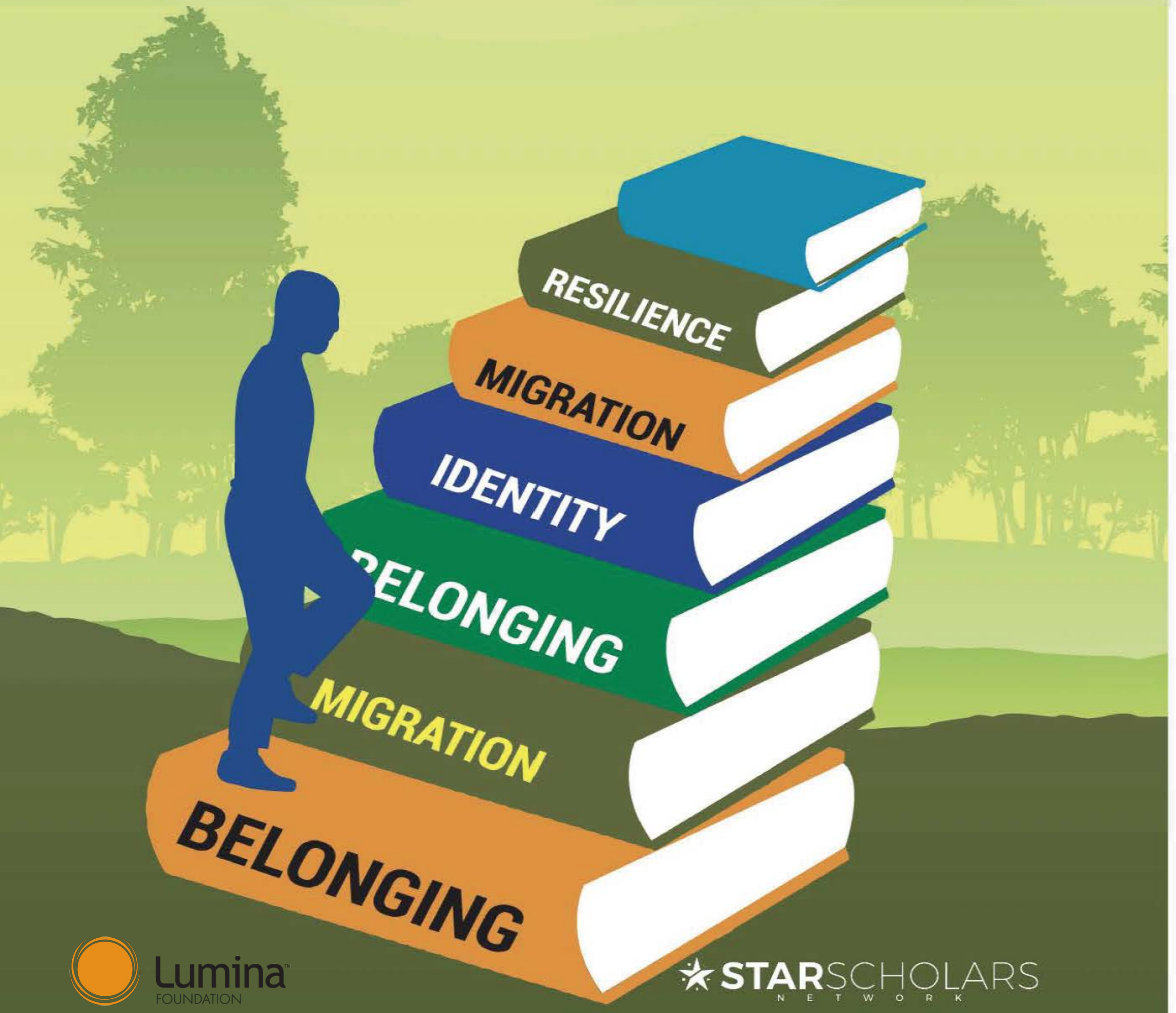
The First in the Family

Narrative of First-Generation College Journeys

Edited by Courtney Brown, Krishna Bista, Uttam Gaulee



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Praise for this book

This book reminds us that transformation in higher education often begins in places we least expect, and with people too often overlooked.
George F. Kacenga, PhD, Vice President of Enrollment Management, William Paterson University of New Jersey, USA

As the first in my family to earn a Ph.D. through my own hard work and determination, I can attest that this volume serves as a compelling blueprint for institutions committed to empowering individuals who are not only the first in their families—but the first to lead with courage and conviction.
Jing Luán, PhD, Governing Board Member, MISK Schools, Provost Emeritus

An inspiring narrative emphasizing the need for democratizing access to higher education across cultures, while advocating for the need for more inclusive academic spaces.
Pankaj Mittal, PhD, Secretary General of the Association of Indian Universities and Former Vice Chancellor of Bhagat Phool Singh Women's University, India

These powerful narratives beautifully capture how intercultural growth and academic resilience converge in the lives of first-generation learners, challenging racism, gender bias, and structural inequality. A moving testament to transformation, resistance, and intergenerational commitment.
Sarah Carrica-Ochoa, Profesora Titular, Facultad de Educación y Psicología, Universidad de Naarra, Spain

A moving tribute to the grit and grace of first-generation scholars—this anthology is both an inspiration and a blueprint for a more inclusive academy.
Pankhuri Aggarwal, PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Cincinnati, USA

A powerful collection of stories from diverse first-generation scholars, highlighting their struggles, resilience, and the vital role of support systems in achieving academic and personal success.
Siu-Man "Raymond" Ting, PhD, Professor, Director of Graduate Programs, NC State University, USA

This volume situates the voices of first-generation university graduates in their own unique personal contexts and provides insight into the breadth of pathways that these graduates take to earn their degrees. As a first-gen graduate myself, the stories resonated, and will for others who are seeking guidance on how to be successful in this important life journey.
Shannon N. Davis, PhD, Associate Dean for Faculty and Academic Affairs, George Mason University, Korea

An insightful volume that empowers college students to embrace identity, diversity, and personal transformation.
Chen Su, Doctoral Candidate, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Pennsylvania State University, USA

As a rural education advocate, this book is a valuable resource for academic praxis and serves as a compass to guide young scholars in promoting social justice.
Arlyne C Marasigan, PhD, Professor, College of Advanced Studies, Philippine Normal University, Manila, Philippines

A priceless compass for educators, *First in the Family* charts the paths of their students' transformative journeys of discovery and perseverance, illuminating the way for them to overcome obstacles, transcend borders, and realize their dreams.
Elena de Prada Creo, PhD, Vice Dean for International Affairs, Facultad de Relaciones Internacionales, Campus Universitario, Spain

About the Book

First in the Family: Narratives of First-Generation College Journeys

First in the Family is a compelling anthology that amplifies the voices of first-generation college students and scholars from around the world. This volume captures deeply personal narratives shaped by resilience, identity, migration, and mentorship. Across diverse contexts—from remote villages to prestigious global universities—contributors share how they navigated systemic barriers and cultural expectations to achieve academic success. These transformative stories not only honor the legacy of first-generation learners but also serve as a powerful call for inclusive practices that empower future generations. A must-read for educators, policymakers, and advocates of educational equity.

Editors

Courtney Brown is Vice President of Impact and Planning at Lumina Foundation, where she leads strategic planning, evaluation, and international engagement initiatives to expand access to learning beyond high school. With a background in education policy and performance measurement, she has published widely and is a frequent speaker on postsecondary success, data-driven strategies, and equity in higher education. Dr. Brown holds a Ph.D. from the University of Virginia.

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First in the Family

Narratives of First-Generation College Journeys

Courtney Brown, Krishna Bista, Uttam Gaulee

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Editors

New Titles

1. *ChatGPT and Global Higher Education: Using Artificial Intelligence in Teaching and Learning*, By Xi Lin, Roy. Y Chan, Shyam Sharma, Krishna Bista

2. *Bridging Cultures, Empowering Futures: Global Citizenship and International Education*, By Krishna Bista, Uttam Gaulee, Dawn Michele Whitehead , Bo Zhang

3. *Current Trends in Global Education: Bridging K-12 and Higher Education for an Interconnected World*. By Marina Falasca, Karina J. Baum

4. *Entry Points to US Education: Accessing the Next Wave of Growth,* By Leilt Habte, David Di Maria, Krishna Bista, Jing Luan

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6. *The International Handbook of French Education: Language Learning, Teaching and Advocacy*, By Jerry L. Parker, Amany Saleh

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Introduction

Contextualizing the The First in the Family Experience: Research, Narratives, and Global Perspectives

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In every corner of the globe, first-generation students stand as shining examples of courage and determination, breaking barriers and lighting the way forward for their families and communities. These trailblazers embark on journeys toward higher education, redefining what is possible against the backdrop of daunting challenges. They traverse unfamiliar terrains of academia while balancing cultural heritage and personal dreams. Yet, it is within this delicate dance that they find their strength, empowering themselves and those who follow. Their stories ripple beyond classrooms, igniting hope and fostering change on a larger scale. By chronicling these inspiring narratives, this book honors their pioneering spirits and underscores the transformative power of education. These firsts in families

are not only altering their own lives but are also becoming vital architects of a more inclusive and equitable world.

Defining First-Generation and First-in-Family

The phrase "first-generation college student" has become central to discussions of equity in higher education, perhaps for good reasons, but its definition is not always consistent. In the United States, the term generally refers to students whose parents did not complete a four-year degree (Pascarella et al., 2004; PNPI, 2025). By contrast, in other national contexts such as Australia and the United Kingdom, the language of "first-in-family" is more common, capturing those who are the first in their immediate family—including siblings—to pursue postsecondary education (O'Shea, 2016; Gale & Parker, 2017). Despite these differences, both terms convey a shared reality: students navigating higher education without direct familial precedent, often encountering unique cultural, social, and financial challenges.

In American discourse, "first-generation" is tightly linked to federal policy through TRIO programs (Upward Bound, Talent Search, and Student Support Services) and Pell Grant eligibility, which have historically targeted support toward students from low-income and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (Engle & Tinto, 2008). In Australia, however, the "first-in-family" framing emphasizes cultural identity and relational ties, recognizing that students' educational trajectories cannot be separated from family networks (Southgate et al., 2017). The international differences in terminology underscore the need to examine both commonalities and contextual nuances in the experiences of first-generation learners.

The Demographics of First-Generation Students

Statistical data highlight the scope of the first-generation student population. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute (PNPI, 2025), an estimated 56% of undergraduate students in the U.S. are first-generation, with nearly one-third (31%) of all college students nationwide meeting the strict federal definition of having parents without a four-year degree. Among these, 65% attend public institutions, and over half come from families earning less than $50,000 annually (PNPI, 2025). Students who identify as first-generation are also disproportionately students of color: 59% of Hispanic students, 52% of Black students, and 47% of Native American students fall into this category (PNPI, 2025).

Globally, similar patterns emerge. In Australia, approximately one in two students identify as first-in-family, and their enrollment is strongly correlated with socioeconomic disadvantage (O'Shea, 2016). In the United Kingdom, Thomas and Quinn (2007) reported that first-in-family students are less likely to enter elite institutions and more likely to commute from home, reflecting both financial pressures and cultural obligations. In countries such as Cambodia, Nigeria, and India, where mass higher education is still emerging, first-in-family learners often represent pioneering educational pathways that are reshaping intergenerational expectations (Gale & Parker, 2017; Marginson, 2016).

The Stakes of Access and Attainment

Why does this matter? First-generation students are essential not only to expanding access but also to advancing the mission of higher education as a vehicle of social mobility. They bring to universities perspectives shaped by resilience, cultural wealth, and commitment to family uplift (Yosso, 2005). At the same time, their outcomes reveal persistent inequities. In the U.S., only 27% of first-generation students earn a bachelor's degree within four years, compared to 42% of continuing-generation peers (PNPI, 2025). Attrition rates are higher, time-to-degree is longer, and debt burdens are often greater (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

Internationally, the pattern is consistent. In Australia, Southgate et al. (2017) documented that first-in-family students were more likely to withdraw, citing financial strain, social isolation, and difficulties balancing family responsibilities. In the UK, Thomas (2012) reported that students without parental experience of higher education were more vulnerable to feelings of alienation, often perceiving universities as culturally exclusive. These outcomes suggest that the barriers faced by first-generation learners are not isolated to one country but represent a global educational challenge.

Scholarship and Perspectives

Foundational research in the United States laid the groundwork for understanding these inequities. Terenzini et al. (1996) and Pascarella et al. (2004) demonstrated that first-generation students arrive with fewer academic resources, limited social networks, and less familiarity with college expectations, contributing to persistence gaps. Engle and Tinto (2008) advanced this by showing how structural inequities intersect with individual disadvantage, arguing that institutional responsibility is key to improving outcomes.

Stephens et al. (2012) reframed the issue through *cultural mismatch theory*, arguing that higher education often assumes norms of independence that clash with the interdependent cultural values common among first-generation students. Subsequent interventions affirming interdependent values have been shown to boost belonging and achievement (Stephens et al., 2014; Harackiewicz et al., 2016).

Internationally, Australian scholar Sarah O'Shea (2016) has been a leading voice in reconceptualizing first-in-family students not as disadvantaged but as *trailblazers*. Her narrative-based research emphasizes resilience, cultural bridging, and the transformative impact students have on families and communities. Southgate et al. (2017) further highlight that family dynamics—such as obligations to contribute financially or provide care—are central to the first-in-family experience. In the UK, Gale and Parker (2017) argue for a shift toward "student as partner" frameworks, where institutions co-create inclusive environments that recognize diverse cultural capital.

Narrative and qualitative approaches have also been influential. In their book, O'Shea et al. (2024) illustrates how personal stories complicate broad generalizations, showing that success depends on intricate negotiations between academic aspirations and family expectations. Similarly, Waalkes et al. (2023) emphasizes the sustaining role of mentorship and community in countering isolation. These perspectives resist deficit framings and instead highlight resilience, adaptability, and relational strengths.

At Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), recent studies underscore how culturally responsive environments nurture first-generation success. Level (2024) finds that parental involvement, cultural affirmation, and strong peer networks help mitigate systemic barriers, affirming the distinct role HBCUs play in advancing equity. Likewise, Nevins (2024) documents how first-generation identities shape post-graduate career pathways, particularly as many alumni go on to become community college faculty who mentor the next generation.

While much of the scholarship on first-generation or first-in-family students originates in the United States, there is a growing body of comparative and international research that illustrates how access to higher education for these students is a global concern. In South Asia, studies show that students from rural and low-income households often face systemic inequities linked to caste, gender, and geography. For instance, Patnaik and Narayanan (2020) highlight how first-generation learners in India often lack social capital and

encounter language barriers in English-medium universities, which contribute to higher dropout risks. Similarly, Nepal's massification of higher education has increased participation, but students from historically marginalized castes and rural backgrounds continue to struggle with academic preparedness and limited mentorship (Bista et al, 2020; Pherali, 2013).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, first-in-family students represent a critical demographic as higher education expands. Adegoke (2021) found that Nigerian first-generation students experience financial hardship, inadequate academic advising, and cultural dissonance, yet demonstrate strong resilience and peer support networks. Comparable challenges are observed in South Africa, where Walker and Mkwananzi (2015) show that first-generation students face structural inequalities but also leverage higher education as a means of transforming family trajectories and securing social mobility.

In Latin America, research underscores how structural inequality intersects with first-generation student experiences. For example, Tinto and Engstrom (2002) documented early interventions in Mexico aimed at improving retention, while more recent work by González Canché (2019) illustrates that despite regional expansion of higher education in countries like Brazil, Peru, and Mexico, first-generation students continue to face limited access to elite institutions and constrained upward mobility. These findings reflect enduring class stratification in higher education across the region.

Taken together, these international perspectives demonstrate that while the U.S. context has shaped much of the first-generation discourse, similar dynamics of structural inequity, cultural negotiation, and resilience are evident globally. The narratives included in this volume extend the literature by situating first-in-family experiences within diverse global systems of higher education, highlighting both the universal challenges and the specificity of cultural and structural contexts.

Purpose of This Volume

This volume builds on this expanding body of scholarship by centering the voices of first-generation and/or first-in-family students themselves. Contributors to this book narrate their paths from diverse contexts: from the mountains of Himalayas to the rural villages of Cambodia, from urban centers in the U.S. to migration journeys across continents. Each chapter captures resilience, identity formation, and transformation in the face of systemic barriers.

The book is organized into three sections:

- **Section I: Rising Against the Odds** showcases stories of perseverance, from sharecropper legacies to mature students reclaiming education later in life.

- **Section II: Identities in Transition and Transformation** explores intersections of gender, race, neurodiversity, and cultural identity, illustrating how first-generation learners redefine themselves through higher education.

- **Section III: Global Crossroads and Educational Migration** highlights international voices, including narratives from Cambodia, Benin, and across diasporic communities, situating first-generation experiences in a broader transnational frame.

The purpose of this structure is twofold: to demonstrate the universality of first-in-family experiences and to acknowledge the contextual specificities that shape them. By weaving together U.S. and global narratives, this book contributes to a comparative understanding of how first-generation identity intersects with race, class, gender, geography, and migration.

A Call to Action

Ultimately, *First in the Family* is not only a collection of stories but also a call to educators, policymakers, and institutions. The voices in this volume testify to the transformative potential of education when barriers are removed and opportunities are equitably distributed. They also expose the unfinished work of higher education systems worldwide in creating inclusive pathways for those historically excluded.

By amplifying these narratives, this book seeks to reframe first-generation learners as central to the future of higher education. They are not simply breaking barriers for themselves; they are redefining what access, belonging, and success mean in a global society.

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Bios

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Chapter One

From Sharecropper to Scholar: Breaking Barriers, Building Futures

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Abstract

In the 1930s, my grandfather worked as a sharecropper after receiving only a third-grade education. Nearly a century later, I stand as his granddaughter, an education scholar and faculty member. This narrative traces my family's evolving relationship with education as a form of social, cultural, and economic capital. I reflect on my journey as a Black woman navigating higher education and how those experiences now inform my role as a mentor and professor. While we celebrate the progress of historically excluded communities, we must also recognize the persistence and strength it takes to overcome systemic barriers—and to keep the path open for others.

Keywords:

first-generation student, Black women in academia, educational equity, generational progress, systemic barriers

INTRODUCTION

My family is so proud of me. That is evident in the ways in which they snuck away from work to log on for my dissertation defense and how they sacrificed their Mother's Day plans to spend the day at my graduation. Relatives who never attended family functions were there. Loud and proud. My family is proud that I have earned a PhD, and they love to "casually" bring up to people that their "[insert whatever my relationship is to them] is a Professor!" This first-generation student is now a faculty member. What a way I have come it seems. This chapter celebrates educational advancements among my family and me and the significance for us as a people. Our celebration is not absent of systemic critique and the necessity for change. This chapter asks, what is considered "a win" worthy of celebration, and what work is needed to finish the race?

EDUCATION: THE GREAT EQUALIZER

I grew up knowing that Granddaddy, his siblings, and parents were sharecroppers in cotton fields. I was told he dropped out of school in third grade so that he could work and that he later joined the military as soon as possible in hopes of a better life. I learned my relatives had varying degrees of literacy and that my Great-Granddaddy and my Great-Aunt often signed their names with an 'X'. So as an adult, it was not lost on me Granddaddy's pride was that all 10 of his children graduated from high school and that a handful have some college experience. I'd often witness him asking them to help him read or write things, and them rely on one another and Grandmommy to make sense of it all. Granddaddy did not understand all things education. He simply understood education to be an important endeavor to pursue.

When his grandchildren started enrolling and graduating from higher education institutions, I knew he was proud of our accomplishments. Older in years then, he would make whatever trip to a graduation he could, even when we began graduating with graduate or professional degrees. What I loved about Granddaddy was that his pride in us for our academic accomplishments never seemed to make him feel small or distant from us. It seemed as though our accomplishments were his too. And to me, they were. Because of him, we are. Among my cousins and me, there are those of us who have Associate's, Bachelor's, Master's, and various terminal degrees (MBA, JD, DC, PhD). Since our initial degrees, a few of our parents have completed bachelor's and master's degrees, even in their sixties. Granddaddy is no longer here to witness these, but I know he is proud. In addition, knowing the source of his pride in our accomplishments, I am proud of my family and me as well. We did what so many of us have been

denied the opportunity to do! We did what so many of us *still* do not have the opportunity to do. So has education lived up to its promise?

PRIDE COMETH BEFORE THE FALL

We were told to chase after our dreams and be anything we wanted to be. We had academic opportunities our parents and grandparents never had. We applied to and enrolled in schools that no longer held de jure segregation, we chose fields of study that were no longer race- or gender-specific. We moved north or south of home, without fear of being too far away or never being able to see family again. We landed jobs in our fields of study; we had become professionals. We did it! Right...?

What our family had pride in was also something that put distance between some of us at times. Graduating from an all-Black high school and going to school at a predominantly white institution was a culture shock. I met people from all over the country and world—both of which were new experiences for me. My first break home, my family would tease or ridicule me for the "new" music I listened to, and my "unnecessary" vocabulary shift. I had not seen this newness as replacement but expansion. However, some of them saw it as erasure. Was I truly so different? Do you not know me? It was all so confusing because I had always been celebrated for my academic accomplishments. I skipped a grade and could have skipped more. I was always on honor roll. I tested well above average. Ivy league schools tried to recruit me. My classmates and cousins would ask me for help with homework. Wasn't I doing this school thing right?

I think for all of us, we believed in education, but we had not truly seen what it was like past high school. As a first-generation student and one of the oldest grandchildren meant in many respects, I was one of the firsts to explore higher education. We hadn't seen the impact it would have on the person. We only dreamed of the impact it would have on the livelihood. We didn't go into it with rose colored glasses—we knew we were Black and what that has always meant in this country. Even as laws have changed, we have continued to face racialized and gendered discrimination (Spates et al., 2020). However, we had not anticipated how out-in-the-open and pervasive discrimination would be with little to no recourse. During my time as a student, I witnessed a noose, cotton balls thrown at a Black culture center (Garrison, 2010), a neo-nazi march (The Associated Press, 2007), a swastika made of feces (Teoh & Wynn, 2015), and my English instructor repeatedly saying the N word in class and reducing my grade an entire letter grade because the only non-white student in the class told her she was wrong.

I experienced my education faculty member telling me, the student who sat front and center in her course and had an A at the time of her comment, that I did not take school seriously. Why? Because I emailed her prior to her class to say the person who was supposed to relieve me from my front desk shift had not shown up and I was going to be late because I had to wait for professional staff to come get the building keys from me. She told me school comes first. Well in my case, work was needed for school. I was a fully Pell-eligible student with a statewide, high-value merit scholarship who still had to take out loans and work three jobs to pay for school. My mother told me not to get a job and to focus on doing well in school, but she was unable to pay my remaining tuition and fees or provide me with money for hidden fees such as certification assessments and professional clothing I needed starting the sophomore year. In addition, it turns out, even though I live on campus and can walk to my classes, the store, and the dining hall, I need a car to go to a middle or elementary school, two or three times a week. My mother sacrificed having a car so that I could drive hers for my studies.

AN EDUCATIONAL SHIFT

Other people significantly helped me navigate higher education as well. Even though my family was not well-off or well-versed in my new academic or geographic venture, they supported me as best they knew how. As I learned more, I shared my insights, which brought our understandings closer in alignment and strengthened their support. I remain thankful for who they continue to be to me as my academic and geographic dealings evolve. I am thankful in some respects for having to figure out so much of college on my own. Navigating higher education meant I had to ask questions, observe, and try and try again. It meant I was, like many students from similar backgrounds, determining how many credit hours to enroll in by evaluating how many I could afford in time and money. It meant missing opportunities because no one told me about them, and being told about ones that were only mentioned to me by someone projecting stereotypes. However, it also meant when a professional took interest in me, I noticed and greatly valued that relationship.

In addition to my employment, I was involved in some of everything during my undergraduate studies: student government, choir, professional organizations, sorority life, undergraduate research, and more. All of these organizations had faculty or staff advisors, some of whom became mentors. As an on-campus residential student for the entirety of my undergraduate studies, I was one of the few returning students to the residence halls. I viewed my hall coordinators as mentors and eventually asked one how I could prepare for her job. This is when she told me about Student Affairs as a profession and course of study. I

soon realized that the most impactful people on campus had been professional staff. They had helped me to get involved, develop healthy time management habits, explore financial literacy, and feel included in spaces my faculty at times excluded me from. I realized I did not want to be a teacher, but a staff member who supported the whole person. And so, I switched careers into something that confused my family even more, and I completed a master's with a student affairs leadership concentration. This eventually led me to work in higher education for several years before I returned to school for a PhD with a higher education administration emphasis. This degree I now use as faculty. Look who is teaching after all. Funny how that happened. I'd say it is less "full-circle" and more of a spiral upward. After all, my goal has always been to make my family and community proud and to give back to them from whatever position I may be in.

What I have learned is what makes them proud is not just graduating, but in making the pathway just a little bit better for us now that I have. They look to me often to answer the "now what" or "so what" inquiry. What will I do now that I have graduated and why does that matter? There was so much about higher education that I didn't know and that I am continuing to learn. Now in keeping with cultural tradition, I share my wisdom with younger Black people (in age and/or professional experience), so they may navigate this landscape a bit differently than I did. Even today, I am the only Black woman faculty member in my school. It is lonely being the only. However, the Black students who see me are so happy they do because they sense that I see them too. We are here. But here is no place to say we have arrived. We are still so small in number, not for a lack of trying. We continue to experience "pet to threat," among the hues of misogynoir (Stallings, 2020). We continue to climb career Stairmasters, in part because what we were told is not our reality. All is not lost. Although our resiliency is an overworked and overdeveloped muscle, it remains strong in us. Being the first in my family taught me that first implies there will be a second. I won't always be alone. The next Black woman who is the first in her family to complete any level of higher education will find me and the others on the gravel pathway we have been laying as we journey, and will find rest and rejuvenation in the garden we sew.

SYSTEMICALLY SEPARATE, UNEQUIVOCALLY UNEQUAL

Even though I had the good fortune of "defying the odds" and being first in my family to accomplish what I have in my academic and professional life, there are still more and more odds stacking against me and my community. What good are fancy titles and degrees if the wage you earn is not enough to shelter and feed yourself and your loved ones? Black women still receive such unequal pay

(Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2024) and are often still expected to be grateful, almost celebratory, for the disparity. It also pains my family to think they believed in higher education as a social status change agent and security for a better future for self and community, to see the realities it holds for people like us, even today. Education is not the great equalizer and can sometimes serve as a way to separate minoritized communities from each other in pursuit of approval of the majority. I still believe my present work is meaningful, and I know who I have grown to be is positively impacted in many ways by my time as a college student. However, if higher education is to be a public good, it is to see all peoples as the public, and be good to everyone. I can't say for certain if that will happen in my lifetime or not. But I can say that in the meantime, you can find me somewhere supporting my people, who support me in all that I do.

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BIO

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Chapter Two

Rising from the Mountains: A Story of Resilience and Achievement

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Abstract

In this powerful personal narrative, the author reflects on his journey from Darkha, a remote Himalayan village in Nepal without roads, electricity, or schools in the 1950s, to becoming a Ph.D. graduate in the United States. As the youngest of eight children, he overcame immense obstacles to pursue education—a path few in his village could imagine. At age ten, his life changed dramatically when he moved to Kathmandu for schooling, aided by his brother who adjusted his age to secure admission. This chapter highlights the resilience and determination that fueled his academic ascent, emphasizing education's transformative potential across borders and generations.

Keywords:

first-generation college student, Himalayan village, educational journey, resilience and determination, transformative education

For a five-year-old boy, running freely in open spaces without any supervision was the ultimate idea of freedom. Such was the place called Darkha, the remote village in western Nepal where I was born. The year was 1943, and while World War II raged elsewhere, life in Darkha was undisturbed by modernity or global conflict. When the war ended in 1945, the returning Gurkha soldiers who had fought against the Nazis and the Japanese were a sight to behold.

During World War II, Gurkhas served in the British Army, fighting alongside the British in various parts of the world, including Burma, Malaya and Singapore. The recruitment of Gurkha soldiers in the British Army began after the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816), a conflict between the British East India Company and the Kingdom of Nepal. Despite being adversaries, the British were impressed by the bravery, resilience, and combat skills of the Gurkhas, a group of soldiers from Nepal's hill regions. Following Nepal's defeat and the signing of the Treaty of Sugauli in 1816, the British began enlisting Gurkhas in their army.

Fighting in the jungles of Burma with the Japanese proved especially brutal because of heavy casualties suffered by both sides. Many Gurkha soldiers returned home on crutches, having lost their legs in the battle. However, they wore injuries like badges of honor, proudly displaying their medals of valor, including, in some cases, the prestigious Victoria Cross—the highest military award bestowed for bravery in the British Army. According to the U.K. Ministry of Defense, Gurkha soldiers have been awarded sixteen such Victoria Crosses throughout history.

I still remember one retired Gurkha soldier from a neighboring village, wearing what looked like a Victoria Cross on his tattered coat. His stories of fighting under harsh conditions in the jungles of Burma (now Myanmar) captivated me as a child. Listening to these tales of survival and bravery, I grew up filled with wonder and a desire to explore the world beyond Darkha.

Darkha was as remote as a place could be. There were mountain trails, but modern roads, schools, electricity, and healthcare were lacking; they were things of the distant future. For most villagers, who were farmers and laborers, education was rare and considered unnecessary. Those who wanted to study had to trek for days to reach Kathmandu or other administrative centers. My father, however, believed that education could change my future. He had already sent his three older sons to the capital, where they found government jobs after receiving secondary education. I was expected to follow in their footsteps. Higher education was reserved only for the members of the ruling class or those in power. To earn a higher-quality education, one had to travel to British India, namely Calcutta (Kolkata) or Darjeeling. Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital, had only one

English-medium school, namely the Durbar School, which was originally built in 1854 to educate the sons of the Ranas—the ruling class of Nepal. However, in 1902, admission to Durbar School was opened to the public by Dev Shamsher Jang Bahadur Rana, and the school was affiliated with the University of Calcutta. A handful of private schools began to appear in Kathmandu only thereafter. Because private schools charged fees, most people with financial difficulties chose to attend Durbar high school, as it was free.

With no schools in Darkha, my childhood was spent climbing trees, catching birds, and running wild. I still carry some scars on my body as witness to my wild adventures in the rugged terrain of Darkha. When I turned ten, my father decided it was high time for me to leave the village and get an education. So began the journey to Kathmandu, a three-day trek through the mountains and valleys. When I arrived, one of my older brothers took charge of my education. Knowing that I could not succeed in grade five without basic knowledge of English, he spent a year tutoring me intensively. Even then, I was not ready for grade five. To give me a better chance, he reduced my age on school records and enrolled me in grade three instead. That is when my arduous journey of learning and self-discovery began.

Graduating from high school opened doors I never imagined. In 1962, I earned a scholarship to study art at a prestigious university in India, followed by a Fulbright fellowship to the United States in 1972. Pursuing a Ph.D. in art history felt like scaling my own Everest—it was a monumental achievement, not just for me but for my entire family. I was the first in my family to earn a doctorate and the first to set foot in America. Reflecting on that journey, I still find it hard to believe. Did that ten-year-old boy from a remote mountain village truly accomplish all this? My memoir, *Nepal to California: A Life of Adventure and Memories*, chronicles this extraordinary journey. It was like taming a Yeti and making it step out of its Himalayan cave, if it truly existed!

As they say, success breeds inspiration. My achievements motivated other family members to aim higher. Today, I have nephews who have earned advanced degrees, including one with an MBBS in medicine and another with a Ph.D. Growing up in Nepal, I often heard adults invoke the Yeti to discipline children. "If you don't eat your food," they would say, "the Yeti will come and take you." The myth of the Yeti loomed large in our imaginations, adding a touch of mystery to our lives. The Yeti, or the Abominable Snowman, is as much a legend as the Canadian Sasquatch or Scotland's Loch Ness Monster. For the people of Nepal's mountains, the Yeti is part of folklore, part of enigma.

For many Americans, Nepal itself is a kind of enigma. Some have no idea where it is. I've encountered people who thought Nepal was in Africa, and an Italian landlord in Los Angeles once assumed I was from Naples and started speaking to me in Italian. For those who do know of Nepal, it is often associated with Mount Everest, the Yeti, and—to a lesser extent—the Buddha. Lumbini, the Buddha's birthplace, is in Nepal, but many mistakenly believe it is in India. This is another story altogether.

Living in the United States, I spent a lot of time introducing Nepal to others. It was both rewarding and frustrating. My foreign accent and brown skin made me stand out, for better or worse. On the one hand, I was often invited to represent Nepal at cultural events or speak about its heritage. I became a regular guest in programs such as the History Channel's *Ancient Aliens*, the BBC's *Natural History* series, and Australia's *72 Dangerous Animals of Asia*. I continue to receive invitations to speak on various podcasts on the current events of Nepal. On the other hand, I faced discrimination, especially as a struggling student looking for housing. I would call landlords about an apartment only to be told it was already rented. Weeks later, I would see the same apartment listed again. It was clear that I did not fit their idea of an ideal tenant. Discrimination exists, but life continues.

From being told, "Go back to your country," to welcoming students of all races and backgrounds into my classroom, my experiences have been a study in contrast. The racism I encountered did not make me bitter; it made me richer and more empathetic. I have made it a point to treat all my students with kindness and respect, regardless of their gender, race, or background. This perspective has made me a better person and a better teacher.

Life is a journey with a destination, and it is up to us to chart our own path even though we are guided by a GPS because every phone or a car is equipped with it that guides us where we want to go. I firmly believe that life must have purpose. With our creative and thinking minds, we are capable of achieving higher goals.

Bio

Deepak Shimkhada, born in Darkha, Nepal, is a scholar, author, and educator with expertise in art, religion, and cultural studies. He earned his M.A. in Fine Arts from the University of Baroda and a Ph.D. from Claremont Graduate University. A Fulbright Fellow, he has taught at numerous U.S. institutions and contributed to academic and public discourse through books, articles, and media appearances. His works explore the intersections of art, religion, and science. He is the author of *Nepal to California* and several academic texts. In 2024,

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Chapter Three

The Miracle of a Shooting Star: A First HBCU Graduate's Journey Toward Global Impact

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Abstract

In this narrative, I embrace the metaphor of a shooting star to contrast with W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) imagery of fallen stars in *The Souls of Black Folk*. This metaphor illuminates my family's legacy—descendants of African Americans who fled the Jim Crow South in pursuit of a brighter future in the North—and how that legacy inspired my path. I recount my transformative experience at West Virginia State University, where I became the first in my family to graduate from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). Through the empowering culture of the HBCU, I found inspiration in its historical figures, which ultimately propelled me to study abroad, pursue a PhD, and dedicate my life to international education.

Keywords:

HBCU graduate, first-generation college student, African American legacy, international education, educational empowerment

Introduction

As I ruminate on my educational journey, I would like to contextualize this narrative by drawing from one of my favorite quotes by W. E. B DuBois (1903) in his magnum opus, *The Souls of Black Folk,* which reads:

"Throughout history,
the powers of single black men
flash here and there like falling stars,
and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness" (p. 3).

This is the nature of my positionality, which lies at the complex intersection of being an African American man who descends from enslaved Africans who survived the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade and becoming the first person in my family's history to graduate from an HBCU. Although the historical phenomenon of U.S. chattel slavery and its aftereffects indicate that our brightness as a people has often been ignored, disappearing into the vast universe of nothingness, such as fallen stars, I'd like to contrast this metaphor by positioning myself as a *miracle*, a *shooting star* that has preserved the brightness of my family, community, and people. One who has lived to tell the *tale* of survival, triumph, and perseverance so that the powerful stars of the past do not fall out of the sky of humanity. I will start this tale by exploring how my family history inspired me to become the first person in my lineage to graduate from an HBCU.

Escaping the Racial Violence and Terror of the Jim Crow Era

Through oral histories from grandparents and archives, I learned that my family (maternal lineage) comes from Crawfordville, Georgia, a small town of a few hundred people, about an hour and a half outside of Atlanta, Georgia. I would sit and listen to my great aunts and grandmother talk about their life as little girls living and visiting the rural South during the mid-20th century, and it made me feel like I was time-traveling. I'd listen to them talk about the dirt roads, out-houses, raising chickens, picking peas in their dresses, and simply 'living off the land,' as they would say. However, between the lines, there was a more haunting reality that followed them throughout their lives, racism, segregation, and terror. This haunting reality can be traced all the way back to the Liberty Hall plantation in Crawfordville, Georgia, owned by the U.S. Congressman, the first and only Vice President of the Confederacy, Alexander Stephens [1812--1883] (University of Georgia Libraries, 1837--1895). I couldn't fathom the fact that my great grandparents carried the Stephens name and that I could see the grounds in which their forefathers were held captive as property, dehumanized, and

exploited. It then dawned on me that I am not far removed and that I must do everything in my power to live in a way that would honor their legacy and hard work.

Many African American families who were victims of racial violence and terror during the post slavery Jim Crow era (1865--1968) escaped North during the Great Migration (1916--1970) in search of a better life (Wilkerson, 2010). My great grandparents were among those families who packed up all their belongings, and with the clothes on their backs, drove to Ohio settling in Cincinnati, the gateway to the North. I often imagine the fear that my great grandparents experienced having to tell my grandmother and her sisters to crouch under the seat when driving past white people and law enforcement out of fear of being intagenized. Or the dehumanization of having to use the restroom on the side of the road because they weren't allowed in certain establishments along the way. Alternatively, the humiliation they must have felt hearing their father speak in a subservient tone to white citizens just to protect their family from being harmed.

These reflections pushed me to ask the following questions: (1) Where would I be if they wouldn't have survived? (2) In what ways have I benefited from their sacrifices? (3) How can I add positive stories to our family history? I often wrestle with these questions, as it has forced me to consider the fact that my family, who was enslaved on the Liberty Hall plantation by law, was not allowed formal education. After emancipation (post-1863) decades after the early 20th century, their descendants, including my great grandparents, did not obtain formal education or receive a high school diploma. My grandparents, whose parents moved them to Cincinnati, Ohio (the North), went on to obtain their high school diploma. At that point in history, they achieved something monumental, becoming pioneers, taking the baton from their parents, who escaped the Jim Crow South, accomplishing something that had not been done. Building on this foundation, I had been challenged to carry the baton from my parents, who had completed high school, adding positively to our family history. This led to my decision to extend my education beyond high school by attending a university that is of historical significance to the African American community, an HBCU– *West Virginia State University*.

A Place we Love so Dear: HBCU Life at West Virginia State University

West Virginia State University (Est. 1891), is a land grant institution in which a plantation turned college of higher learning before the birth of the 20th century. The reaction from my family following my decision to attend West Virginia State University was that of happiness and pride but also a

sigh of relief. HBCUs were created after the American Civil War (1861--65) during Reconstruction (1865--77) to provide opportunities for higher learning for African Americans, who were systematically restricted from attending predominantly white institutions. In this context, HBCUs have been regarded as *safe havens* for African American youth to learn, develop professionally, and be equipped with the tools needed to become contributing members of American society. In addition, HBCUs were also sites for African American faculty and administrators to share their knowledge through (1) culturally responsive pedagogy, (2) family-centered campus culture, and (3) social justice-oriented programmes. In all, HBCUs are seen as a place of safety, understanding, and promise; a promise that granted African American youth the opportunity to be educated as 1st class citizens, seen as human beings, and given the opportunity to imagine a future beyond the constructs of American racism.

West Virginia State University was my *safe haven*, where I was surrounded by faculty and administrators who became family and pushed me to become involved on campus and the surrounding community. By my junior year, I became the president of the WVSU NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), a member of the TAU chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated (chartered in 1923), and an after-school program facilitator at Mary C. Snow Elementary School. In addition, these professional experiences led me to explore study abroad programs that granted me the opportunity to teach at an orphanage/primary school in Arusha, Tanzania. Teaching abroad in Africa encouraged me to commit my life to international education and the field of linguistics through pursuing my PhD. I began transforming into a confident, ambitious, and innovative young professional ready to leave a positive impact on the world. Additionally, through learning the rich history of my university, I realized that the more I became involved, the more I began to see myself in those African American shooting stars who walked the campus of WVSU before me.

Belonging Among the WVSU Shooting Stars

During my time at West Virginia State University, I became curious about how such a small university could be home to so many important historical figures. The first WVSU shooting star that inspired me was *Carter G. Woodson*, the father of Black history, an international educator, historian, and renowned publisher. Woodson was the only Black American of slave parentage to earn a PhD in history (Vox, 2015). Second, I must honor *Katherine Johnson*, an African American mathematician who worked as a human computer for NASA and calculated the trajectory for Alan Shepard, the first American in space. Although

"NASA eventually began using electronic computers, John Glenn requested that she personally recheck the calculations made by the new electronic computers before his flight aboard Friendship 7—the mission on which he became the first American to orbit the Earth. She went on to do the calculations for the first actual moon landing in 1969" (West Virginia State University, 2016). Third, I was inspired by *Earl Loyd*, the first African American to play in the NBA. After his career as a player, he was then named the first African–American assistant coach in the League, with the Detroit Pistons. Three years later, he became the second African American to be named a head coach of an NBA team (West Virginia State University, n.d.). Finally, Tuskee Airmen, many of whom trained and were graduates of the WVSU Aviation Program during WWII (World War II [1939--1945]). According to Ledbetter, (n.d.) "West Virginia State graduates became a part of the 99thFighter Squadron that fought gallantly in the North African Theater under the command of West Virginia State's George Roberts. Later, the 99th joined the 100th, 301st, and 302nd Fighter Squadrons, which comprised the 332nd Fighter Group, which included many West Virginia State College alumni. The 332nd fought heroically in the European Theater of operation initially under Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. and then under the command of West Virginia State's George Roberts." These are, among others, what I refer to as the WVSU shooting stars whose brightness has changed our world forever.

Learning about their stories gave me inspiration, which helped me create the level of ingenuity necessary to achieve my dreams. With that inspiration, I learned the importance of education and history, using a global perspective like our former Dean, Carter G. Woodson. I learned to insert myself into spaces I was not welcome through using my intellect, solving the complex formula of overcoming racial injustice like NASA's Kathrine Johnson. I learned the gravity of being *first*, becoming a pioneer like Earl Loyd. Lastly, how to be fearless, willing to fight for what's right, remembering my ability to soar above the clouds like the Tuskegee Airman. Their contribution in connection with my family history developed my identity as a young adult, becoming historically and socially conscious of how their stories were connected to who I was and what direction I was going. Throughout my lived experiences giving speeches, conducting meetings, tutoring sessions, and studying abroad in Africa, I often imagined what my great grandparents who escaped the Jim Crow South would think of me and what I chose to commit my life to. Would they be proud of me? Are there parts of themselves that exist in me? Are they smiling down from heaven? Am I able to conceptualize how much of a *miracle* I am? Reflecting on those questions, I agree that Dubois' (1903) metaphor of *fallen stars* has

been a common narrative throughout history, which challenges the ontological foundations of African American existence. However, in that agreement comes the need to resist those narratives by creating space to bestow upon our society an avenue of preserving the brightness of our ancestors, which I intended to do through the metaphor of *shooting stars.* This intellectual avenue, I assert, will ensure that the world may never forget our brightness.

Conclusion

In all, my experiences navigating HBCU life at West Virginia State University involved the crystallization of myself as a *miracle* and *shooting star*. As graduation came, I stood at every statue and every monument on campus, vowing to commit to adding to the legacy of those who came before me. On graduation day, I remember walking through the hallway with my cap and gown, feeling the emotion and weight of high expectations on my shoulders. It almost felt too heavy to bear. Without seeing any faces, I could hear the crowd cheering and the echoes of 'Pomp and Circumstance' in the background. My heart began to beat heavily. I thought to myself, I am indeed a *miracle*, I am indeed a *miracle–the miracle of a shooting star*. I scanned the crowd and found the smiles of my parents and grandparents who sacrificed everything so that my light could shine bright as I soar through this lifetime. I felt the trauma of my family's complex history, their triumphs of resistance, and their spirit of fortitude. In addition, by successfully carrying the baton to the next check-point, I added positively to the story of my lineage and university by honoring the sacrifices of my ancestors who survived the Middle Passage from the continent of Africa, enslavement at the Liberty Hall Plantation in Crawfordville, Georgia, and my grandparents and great grandparents who survived the Jim Crow South. Holding back tears, I stood proudly on the stage in front of my family, becoming the first person to graduate from an HBCU, from my safe haven, West Virginia State University.

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Chapter Four

Faltering Steps to Triumph: A Mature Black Student's Journey of Recovery and Redemption

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Abstract

This chapter shares my transformative journey as a mature Black student who entered academia after years of unfulfilling jobs and personal frustration. What began as faltering steps into academia evolved into a powerful path of recovery, social mobility, and purpose. Despite encountering systemic barriers and institutional biases that often challenge mature and racially marginalized students, I found strength through perseverance, self-empowerment, and the support of mentors and peers. This narrative underscores the importance of inclusive practices—such as mentoring and student support programs—and affirms the role of higher education in fostering redemption, equity, and meaningful change for students from all walks of life.

Keywords:

mature student, Black student experience, educational redemption, inclusive higher education, social mobility

Introduction

For me, the road to redemption through social mobility, self-empowerment, and external recognition as an academic has been a long and arduous journey (McGhee, 2023). I began my journey amidst a pool of skeptics, and to be honest, I was one of them initially. At the time, yet another commission-only sales job had ended. And while I was trying to buy a second-hand household item, I saw an advert trying to fill some university spaces. So I turned my hand to academia. I grew up in a home where education was overly stressed, and I rebelled as education was used as a psychological weapon against me. I left home at 16 and drifted from one job to another with lengthy bouts of unemployment in between. Fortunately for me, I have always had an interest in current affairs and human-interest stories—for example, how a vulnerable youth or an older person had become homeless, physically roofless. This type of thing really piqued my interest as I pursued a degree. Simultaneously, I always had a strong desire to address the issue of obtaining well-paid, stable employment, alongside improving society. This chapter is my life story of how, after a 17-year gap since finishing secondary school, I converted interest and motivation into concrete action and began the process of transforming my life by becoming better educated. It discusses some of the challenges I faced as a mature Black student who had returned to formal education in the previous year via an access course (Hamza, University of Bradford, 2024).

Shock and Awe

Attending my first lecture was quite daunting in the sense that it was surreal, and being one of the oldest in the tutor group felt quite strange. As a mature student, I had not been through the standard route of going to university straight after finishing A levels that my student peers had followed. I was the only racially marginalized (then called ethnic minority) student in our tutorial group from the second semester onwards. The underrepresentation of racially marginalised students was a manifestation of institutional bias in the form of structural racism (see also Marvell, 2022), which I am sure was unintentional. At the time, the way the United Kingdom (U.K.) higher education institutes (HEIs) delivered their service acted to disadvantage and/or discourage Black students. There was a certain amount of shock and awe, as much to myself, the academic teaching staff, and fellow students on the course. It quickly became established that I was quite a strong, articulate student who could make meaningful contributions to group discussions.

Given this favorable beginning to my learning journey, my problems began with what I now know to be feelings that I did not belong, akin to impostor syndrome. Due to my sales background, I had a confident disposition when meeting with strangers, talking about anything, and building relationships with people I had only just met. In my student journey, though, some students found me too forward. This was more with my fellow mature students of the tutorial group, who were all White people. The younger generation of students, recently from secondary school, who were also all White, did not mind my outgoing personality or my confidence in group discussions. Fortunately, as I integrated with other younger students as regards music and sports, the fear of not fitting in, impostor syndrome, wore off relatively quickly. This was helped when the initial batch of assignment marks came back, and it was clear I was in the upper quintile of the tutorial group regarding educational attainment.

I encountered systemic barriers when I went on student placement with a registered social landlord as part of my undergraduate course (Seuwou, 2021). I found that one of the reasons I secured my placement was that the organization wanted to demonstrate that they employed Black people. I was the second racially marginalized person at the office where I was based. This helped the organization reach a notional target of 15% of the workforce being from an ethnic minority background, as per the national census data applicable at the time. I felt that there was a systemic barrier present in me not having been assigned a racially marginalized mentor or peer support resource to go to, in case of difficulties with the student placement at the time. I also felt that my university should have tried to place me with an organisation that specialised in delivering services for racially marginalized communities. My placement would have been more effective had this taken place.

I achieved a 2:1 in my university degree in the 1990s, which in the U.K. is just one step below the top university grade of a 1:1, but I encountered some systemic barriers in some learning modules. The main barrier was the lack of pre-assessment exercises, which would have supported a pragmatic, mature Black student like me in grasping key concepts more easily. It would also have been helpful to have had more formal assessments that had been taught using active pedagogy, for example, in-tray exercises that test a student's workplace prioritization skills, problem-solving, simulation, and role-playing. To address this issue, some curriculum design co-creation between students and teaching staff would have been required (National Education Opportunities Network, 2024). Some mature Black students, who have been away from formal education for two decades or more, may well be able to engage with participatory, active learning assessments more than they can engage with passive learning essays or

exam assessments. It is heartening to say that in the 2020s, more active pedagogy learning styles, alongside pre-assessments, are being used by U.K. HEIs.

Student Support Services

Despite being someone who did quite well at university, I would have benefited at times from, for example, pastoral care, a student mentor, or student support services. Back in the 1990s, when I did my degree, a friend in the same course contacted the Student Support team to discuss a matter with them. She felt the person she dealt with in Student Support Services was, to a degree, judgmental and unsupportive. This created tension, and eventually my friend dropped out of the course. Not everyone is able to build a support system around them (Hamza, 2024). Since the 1990s, U.K. HEIs' Student Support Services have been much more student-centered. Not only do they respect confidentiality, but training has also significantly improved. Student Support staff are much less judgmental, and more switched on, able to address problematic, sensitive matters. One role Student Services can fill is to put students at ease by reminding them they have been through the correct procedure and have been accepted. That way, there is no impostor syndrome. Student Services can provide student wellbeing by being supportive by saying to the student: You are a student enrolled in a course, you are part of the student body, and you belong here. This is a real benefit of Student Services staff, who have increasingly been empowered to increase wellbeing oversight and increase supervision and support over time (see Ackah, 2024).

Conclusions

My undergraduate course underpinned my view of the transformative power of education for oneself and the wider society. I became equipped to identify and articulate how HEI practices and policies can create or remove actual and perceived barriers, which enable or impede racially marginalized students. After my baccalaureate degree, I completed 12 years of post-graduate work in the community development and social housing professions. Then there was a global financial crisis that shook up employment practices, and the world of work restructured to adapt to a new normal. Due to precarity in work in the few years after the credit crunch, I returned to academia to study a Master's in Global Social Policy. I noted there had been significant improvements in U.K. higher education since the 1990s, when I initially graduated, and 2011, when I started my Master's. Pastoral support was offered at the second university, compared to where I studied for my baccalaureate. There was a proactive approach to inform Master's students of various bursaries and grants they could apply for to cover books and living

expenses. There was a far bigger emphasis on encouraging early contact with the Student Services Team if students had a personal problem affecting their studies.

Teaching pedagogy within the Master's course was much more collegiate, with regular use of active, collaborative, and plenary learning modalities. There were no pre-assessments, and assignments were standard essays, exams, and presentations. I graduated from the Master's course in 2012, having enjoyed the experience so much that I applied for various PhD programs. I secured a PhD scholarship to study social policy in 2012 and was awarded my PhD in 2017. My PhD in Social Policy took me full circle to the reasons why I entered academia in the first place—secure stable employment, and to be able to improve the lives of others.

During both my Master's and doctoral degrees, I did not have any negative experiences caused by institutional bias, racism, or systemic barriers. For me, educational transformation has made a stark difference in my life. I am no longer trapped in a cycle of unrealized potential, dead-end jobs, and welfare claims. Currently, I work in education as a tutor providing behavioral science coaching, and teaching and assessing medical students, our doctors of the future. Education enables people to rewrite their own narrative quite late on in life. To a large degree, a person's past is not their future; there is time for individuals to change their lives, their perspectives, and how they view the rest of their future. If they put in the time, effort, and perseverance, many people with disadvantaged pasts can start again. Without question, education is the road to recovery and redemption for most people.

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Bio

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Chapter Five

From Dream to Doctorate: A Journey of Determination and Achievement

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ABSTRACT

This chapter chronicles my journey as the first woman in my family to achieve a doctoral degree, a path marked by resilience, defiance of societal expectations, and the pursuit of academic excellence. Growing up in a community where few pursue higher education, especially women, my dream of earning a doctorate seemed distant. Despite numerous challenges—including balancing family responsibilities, facing financial hurdles, and navigating male-dominated NGOs, activism, and academic spaces—I remained committed to my vision. This chapter reflects on personal sacrifices, the mentors who guided me, and the unwavering support of those who believed in my potential. Through determination, perseverance, and an unshakable belief in the power of education, I was able to break through the barriers that stood in my way. This story is not only about achieving academic success but also about inspiring the next generation to redefine their possibilities and pursue their dreams fearlessly.

Keywords:

first-generation woman scholar, doctoral journey, gender and education, perseverance and mentorship, academic empowerment

EARLY LIFE: SEEDS OF DETERMINATION

I was born into a working-class family in Durban, South Africa, where practical skills and resilience were emphasized. Education was primarily valued as a means to secure stable employment rather than a tool for personal growth or societal change. For women, family and household responsibilities often took precedence over academic or professional aspirations.

Despite this, I always felt a desire for more. I was curious, drawn to books and radio and eager to learn about the world beyond my immediate surroundings. Although pursuing a doctoral degree was not yet a clear goal, I knew education would shape my future. It was my early experiences in school that planted the seeds of determination. Encouraging teachers who saw my potential nurtured my ambition, showing me that academic success was possible if I worked for it. Nevertheless, as a young girl from a family with no history of higher education, pursuing such a dream seemed daunting.

Growing up in apartheid in South Africa as an Indian from a middle-class family presented unique challenges. My forefathers came to Durban as Passenger Indians. The Passenger Indians were Indian immigrants who arrived in South Africa from the late 19th century onward, primarily as traders, professionals, and entrepreneurs. Unlike indentured laborers, they paid their passage and came to various regions of India voluntarily, seeking economic opportunities. They played a significant role in developing commerce, particularly in Natal, where they sought economic opportunities but faced strict racial segregation. My father, a teacher-turned-principal, and my mother, who had little formal education, both instilled in me the importance of education as a means to overcome these systemic barriers. Many girls in my family were married young, but my father, my mentor, advocated for my education. He often said, "Education is the one thing no one can take from you," and this belief guided me on my path to academic achievement and personal growth.

This chapter shares my journey toward earning a doctorate, reflecting on the racial injustices and discrimination that influenced my path apart from South Africa. This highlights the importance of racial justice and equity in education, mirroring the struggles faced by many Black students in systems designed to marginalize them. I hope my story inspires others to believe in the transformative power of education and the need to dismantle racial inequities in academia.

THE UNIVERSITY EXPERIENCE: NAVIGATING UNCHARTED WATERS

Being the first in my family to pursue higher education and earn a doctorate meant breaking through barriers shaped by apartheid and gender norms. While education was valued in my family, the idea of obtaining a doctorate was foreign to me. I had to navigate both the challenges of academia, and the expectations placed on women in my community, where traditional family roles often overshadowed professional ambitions.

Becoming a first-generation university student was a pivotal moment, but it brought new challenges. Without family role models in higher education, I faced the daunting application process, academic expectations, and the overwhelming university experience on my own. Despite these obstacles, I thrived academically. My curiosity and drive sparked a passion for research and learning that led to my pursuit of a doctorate much later in my life.

However, the social and emotional challenges of being a first-generation student were constant. Feelings of isolation and self-doubt surfaced, especially when surrounded by peers with deep educational roots. Seeking mentors was essential. Faculty members who had overcome similar barriers provided invaluable guidance and inspired me to continue pushing forward, ultimately motivating me to use education as a tool for challenging societal norms and creating meaningful change.

BREAKING BARRIERS: MY JOURNEY TO THE DOCTORATE

Deciding to pursue a university degree was a bold step. It represented not only a personal dream but also a cultural departure from the expectations placed on me as a woman. It also required me to balance familial expectations with academic and career ambition. Many in my family couldn't fully understand why I would continue in school for so long, and there were often questions about when I would "settle down" or pursue more conventional career paths.

My journey to earning a doctorate was shaped by the harsh realities of apartheid. Growing up in a segregated community in South Africa, I attended separate, under resourced schools designated for Indians. The conditions of these schools reflected the broader racial injustices that defined apartheid—in most public schools, classrooms were overcrowded, the facilities were inadequate, and the curriculum was designed to limit our intellectual potential. We were not expected to excel or pursue higher education; instead, the system was built to keep us in menial roles. The primary and secondary schools I attended were semi private and

had excellent teachers and education, which gave me an edge. My driving forces were my love for learning and curiosity about the world. I remember vividly the moment I realized the power of education to challenge the status quo. One of my teachers, despite the oppressive environment, saw potential in me and encouraged me to dream bigger than my circumstances. She shared stories of people who had broken through the barriers of apartheid, using education as their weapon. That was the first time I believed I could one day be one of those people.

However, the road was far from easy. I faced systemic discrimination at every turn. Being an Indian woman in a society that valued White male voices meant that I was constantly underestimated. Even when I was a teacher in a secondary school, I was not given tenure because of my race. At university, I encountered professors and peers who questioned my abilities, assuming that because I came from a segregated background, I wasn't capable of excelling in academia. My motivation and courage wasn't just about proving them wrong; it was about proving to myself that I belonged in those academic spaces, despite the messages society sent me.

Family and community played crucial roles in my journey. Although my parents did not fully understand the magnitude of what pursuing a higher education degree or a doctorate entailed, they supported me with everything they had. They saw my education as a way to lift our family out of the constraints imposed by apartheid. I also found strength in my community, where resilience and perseverance were ingrained in us. We had learned to survive in a system that actively worked to hold us back, and that spirit of survival carried me through the most challenging times of my educational journey.

CULTURAL CONTEXT AND SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES

The challenges I faced as a first-generation student were multifaceted—academic, social, and deeply personal. Academically, I had to contend with the reality that the foundation I had received in apartheid-era schools was not equal to the resources and preparation White students had. I constantly felt the weight of playing catch-up, having to work twice as hard to bridge the gap that racial inequities had created. There were times when I felt overwhelmed, especially during my higher education degree, early career, and a young mother in academia.

Socially, I struggled with isolation. As an Indian woman pursuing higher education in a predominantly White academic environment, I often felt like I did not belong. Moving from an all-Indian university, University of Durban Westville, to University of Natal, a historically White university, I needed a

ministerial consent permit to study. This forced me to experience a different reality in higher education. My experiences of growing up in a segregated community and facing the daily injustices of apartheid were vastly different from those of my White peers, who had benefited from privilege their entire lives. This isolation was compounded by the fact that I did not have anyone in my family who could relate to the pressures of academia or provide guidance on steering the university system. Navigating these cultural expectations requires a delicate balancing act. While I deeply respected my family's values and the sacrifices they made to provide for me, I also felt a strong personal drive to pursue more for myself. Their encouragement affirmed the importance of education, but my own belief in its transformative power pushed me to seek opportunities beyond what was familiar.

At the same time, my journey was shaped by the broader societal context of higher education. As a first-generation university student, I often find myself confronting systemic barriers that disproportionately affect students from underrepresented backgrounds. The lack of access to networks, financial resources, and institutional knowledge made the path to a doctorate more challenging. However, these challenges also reinforced my commitment to making education more accessible and equitable for the future.

However, in these challenges, I found strength in my mentors and support systems. Early in my academic career, I sought mentors who understood the unique struggles I faced as a woman of color in a racially unjust society. They provided academic support and reminded me that my presence was important in spaces that had historically excluded people like me. One of my mentors, who had also fought apartheid, shared with me that our very act of pursuing education was a form of resistance—an act of defiance against a system that sought to oppress us. This mindset fueled my determination to continue.

Additionally, the support of my family and community was invaluable. My parents' unwavering belief in the importance of education, despite the hardships they faced, gave me the motivation to keep going. They had sacrificed so much that I could have opportunities they never had, and I was determined not to let their sacrifices be in vain. In many ways, just pursuing a degree was an act of defiance—a rejection of the limitations that had been placed on me because of my gender and background.

REDEFINING SUCCESS: A NEW LEGACY

My experiences growing up apart from South Africa, navigating racial injustices, and being the first woman in my family to earn a doctorate have profoundly shaped my identity and beliefs. The most significant transformation I have experienced is how I view education, as both a personal achievement and a tool for social justice. My journey has taught me that education can be a means of dismantling the very systems of oppression that sought to limit the Indians. It is a way to reclaim power, redefine narratives, and open doors for those who come after us. After my undergraduate, bachelor's degree, my journey through educating workers on the shop floor while working in the Clothing and Textile unions, gave me the courage and spirit to realize that every little bit of education counts toward success.

Through the lens of racial justice, my doctorate became more than just a degree earned in the years after gaining democracy. It became a symbol of resistance against the apartheid regime and a victory for all those who had been denied access to education because of the color of their skin. My experiences also made me acutely aware of the ongoing racial inequities that persist in higher education, even in the new democratic South Africa. As an academic, administrator, and leader, I now dedicate myself to mentoring staff and students of color, helping them navigate the challenges of academia and ensuring that they do not feel the same sense of isolation that I did. My journey taught me that representation matters, and creating spaces where students of color feel seen, valued, and supported is essential.

On a personal level, earning my doctorate has transformed how I view my own capabilities. Growing up in a society that constantly told me I was "less than" because of my race and gender instilled in me a sense of doubt. However, through my educational journey, I learned that I am capable of achieving far more than society had ever expected of me. This sense of self-discovery and empowerment has shaped every aspect of my life, from my career to my role as a mentor, leader, and role model for many young people, including my children.

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE ASPIRATIONS

My story is not unique—it reflects the systemic barriers that countless Black students face in their pursuit of education today. The remnants of apartheid's racial injustices continue to impact Black and disadvantaged students in South Africa and around the world. Higher education institutions, while

often portrayed as meritocratic spaces, are still rife with inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized students.

My journey underscores the importance of addressing these inequalities. For Black students, education should not be an uphill battle. We need systems that support their success, from equitable access to resources to mentorship programs that address their unique needs to curricula that reflect their histories and experiences. My experiences as a first-generation doctoral student illustrate the need for a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape, where students of color are included and celebrated for their contributions.

Mentorship is critical. Without the guidance and support of mentors—people who believed in me and helped me navigate the academic landscape—I would not have achieved my goals. Mentorship is not just about academic success; it is about building relationships and fostering a sense of belonging in spaces that can often feel alienating.

Additionally, I have learned the power of education as a tool for personal and societal change. My doctorate has opened doors and given me the platform to advocate for others. I now see my role as not only an academic but also a leader who can help create more equitable and inclusive educational environments globally.

Looking ahead, I aspire to continue using my position in academia to support and uplift others. Whether through mentorship, research, or leadership, I am committed to ensuring that future generations, especially those from underrepresented backgrounds, have the opportunity to pursue their dreams. My journey from dream to doctorate was not easy, but it taught me that with determination, support, and a belief in one's potential, anything is possible. My story is about breaking barriers, defying expectations, and redefining what is possible. More than academic success, it is about resilience, determination, and the belief that education has the power to change lives.

CONCLUSION: A CALL TO ACTION

Becoming the first woman in my family to earn a doctorate has been a transformative journey—both for myself and those around me. Sadly, both my father, and my esteemed supervisor, Prof. Cross passed away before I graduated with a PhD.

As I reflect on my journey, I am filled with gratitude for the people who supported me and the opportunities that shaped my path. From Dream to Doctorate is

not just my story—it is a testament to the transformative power of education, determination, and the belief that no dream is too big to achieve. Yet, I remain acutely aware that many barriers still hinder first-generation students, women, and those from marginalized backgrounds from realizing their full potential. My experience is just one example of what can be accomplished, and it fuels my commitment to breaking down these barriers and advancing equity in academia. Education must be a tool for liberation, not exclusion, and we must continue creating spaces where all students—regardless of race or background—have the opportunity to thrive.

In closing, I urge educators, institutions, and policymakers to commit to creating more inclusive and equitable systems that support the success of all students. We must ensure that the next generation of students can pursue their dreams without facing the same racial injustices and barriers I did. By addressing these issues, we can create a future where education truly is a pathway to freedom and justice for all.

BIO

Dr. Naziema Jappie held the position of the director and deputy dean at the University of Cape Town. She is also an experienced mediator, mentor, and coach. Her research expertise lies in leadership and social justice within higher education, focusing on addressing systemic inequalities and fostering community empowerment. Her work critically engages with the intersection of race and economic disparities, analyzing the impact of policy changes on marginalized groups and advocating for transformative reforms that promote equity and inclusion. Dr. Jappie is dedicated to advancing scholarly discourse on these issues and driving meaningful change through her research and leadership. Email: naziema.jappie@uct.ac.za

Chapter Six

Breaking the Mold: A First-Gen Woman of Color Reimagines STEM Education

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Abstract

As a first-generation American, woman of color, and STEM educator, I share my journey through the lens of autoethnography to explore the powerful intersections of identity, education, and equity. Growing up as the child of immigrants, I often found myself navigating two worlds—one shaped by my family's cultural heritage and another by the expectations of American institutions. This duality shaped my educational journey and continues to inform my work as a STEM educator and scholar. In this chapter, I explore how my identity as a first-generation American intersects with race, class, and gender, and how these intersections have influenced my commitment to equity in science and math education. My goal is to illuminate how these layered experiences shape both the challenges students face and the liberatory practices educators can adopt to support them.

Keywords:

first-generation American, woman of color, STEM education, identity and equity, autoethnography

Introduction

As a qualitative researcher, I present my personal story through the lens of autoethnography. Autoethnography allows researchers to explore their own experiences, identities, and behaviors to understand how they influence their teaching practices (Gannon, 2017). This chapter also provides context for why I prioritize equity-centered research and professional development to make classrooms a safe place for all students, particularly those students who are more susceptible to the negative impacts of bias. By sharing my narrative as a first-generation American science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) educator and scholar, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of how racial biases manifest within the school and classroom setting. I also hope to share ways that all educators, not just those teaching science and math, can work to mitigate the impacts of racial bias in the classroom.

As a former secondary science teacher and current faculty member teaching pre-service science and math teachers, I center my equity work within these two disciplines. I believe that success in science and math creates transferable skills that support students in other areas. For example, science writing can help to sharpen students' literacy and reading skills (Radyk et al., 2023). Also, sharing scientific findings enhances students' oral and written communication skills. Developing math reasoning and problem-solving skills can improve students' critical thinking skills both in and outside the classroom (Seale, 2020; Su et al., 2016). In addition to academic benefits, success in science and math can support upward mobility for students as jobs in these areas are higher paying and in high demand (Huang & Paralkar, 2021). For these reasons, addressing issues of equity and inequity in science and math education can have far-reaching benefits for leveling the playing field for students and should therefore be prioritized.

Ultimately, this chapter seeks to inspire educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to examine the impacts of bias in education. By identifying and working to mitigate deeply ingrained biases, educators can create more inclusive and supportive learning environments that empower all students to reach their full potential.

Personal Narrative

One day, when I returned home, I saw an envelope addressed to "the parents of..." with my name following. Curious, I opened the letter to learn that the district was rezoning my neighborhood to a new school. I was in the seventh grade, which

meant my final year of middle school would be different. Since all my friends from the neighborhood would also be going to the new school, it did not feel like such a heavy transition.

When I arrived at the newly rezoned middle school for eighth grade, I was met with stories from peers about how previous students had been withdrawn because "we" were coming. Initially, I was unsure what they meant, but it eventually became clear. The year before, parents had gathered to oppose students from a predominantly Black neighborhood being assigned to the same school as their children. My childhood neighborhood was mostly Black due to "White Flight," a phenomenon where White residents moved out of neighborhoods in response to increasing diversity (Crowder & South, 2008). This demographic shift often stems from race-related stereotypes and misconceptions. Consequently, I was also (un)welcomed by teachers who, while outwardly adhering to expectations of inclusivity, clearly conveyed their discomfort with the changing student demographics.

Middle Grade Experiences with Bias

As a first-generation American, I carried the weight of my family's hopes and the pressure to succeed in a system they were still learning to understand. In middle school, I was generally well-liked by teachers and kept a small circle of friends. But in eighth grade, after transferring to my new school, everything shifted. I began receiving more disciplinary actions, often for minor infractions like talking in class. I was repeatedly sent to the hallway to complete my work, a practice that made me feel isolated and scrutinized. I had my first and only parent-teacher conference for this behavior. When my mother asked my math teacher for suggestions to address my behavior, she said, "Well, I notice she always has her hair braided; maybe she shouldn't get her hair done as often." After that conference, my mother seemed reflective but not upset, as if she knew something but didn't want to tell me.

As the school year progressed, I prepared for graduation. The school held an essay competition for students in their final year, with the winner reading their essay at graduation. Aspiring to be a writer, I prepared an essay for the competition. I poured my heart into the piece, excited to share my voice. One day in class, I folded my essay into a small square and handed it to a friend during math class. Mrs. Bowling (pseudonym), who generally wasn't kind to me, confiscated the paper, assuming it was a note. She often read confiscated notes aloud to embarrass students. When she unfolded my essay, her expression changed. She folded it back

without reading it aloud, put it in her desk, and continued teaching. After class, I asked for the letter, but she refused to give it to me.

As the daughter of Nigerian immigrants who were working tirelessly to build a life rooted in the promise of the American dream, I didn't have the kind of parental presence in school that some of my peers did. Both of my parents worked full-time jobs and couldn't afford to take time off, so my dad wrote a letter to the teacher apologizing and requesting she return the essay. Despite several calls from my parents and a letter apologizing for passing the note and requesting it be returned, she refused. The competition came and went, and I never received my essay. Weeks later, I was called into a meeting with the teacher and principal. The teacher claimed she didn't return the essay because she didn't believe I was smart enough to have written it. She said, "If she really wrote it, she should be able to write it again." I was stunned. I couldn't understand why she doubted my ability, but I knew it was wrong. This was one of many instances where she tried to undermine my intelligence.

Although best practices would explicitly discourage teachers from recommending parents neglect upkeep of their child's hair or find it highly problematic that teachers accuse a student of plagiarism without proof, research shows that Black students experience these types of explicit bias frequently within the classroom setting (see Morton et al., 2022). With a lack of exposure to diverse groups, equity-focused training, and opportunities to challenge personal beliefs, teachers can enter the classroom harboring inaccurate beliefs about students of color (Sorge et al., 2023; van den Bergh et al., 2010; Whitford & Emerson, 2019). The teaching workforce is comprised of teachers who mostly identify as White, female, and middle class, making it highly likely that teachers will work with students whose cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds differ from their own (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

Incongruent cultural backgrounds between an increasingly diverse student population and a mostly homogenous teacher workforce often result in prioritization of Eurocentric norms that penalize students who think or act in ways outside of this standard (Kolovou, 2023; Tyler et al., 2008). Black students are more likely to navigate teachers' deficit framing and negative stereotypes regarding their academic ability and behavior (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019). Similar to my experience with Mrs. Bowling, these students often face misjudgment rooted not in their abilities but in biased assumptions about who belongs in academic spaces. This bias is evident when examining the disproportionate discipline outcomes of Black students, who are more likely to be removed from the classroom setting and punished more harshly for similar

infractions when compared to their White counterparts (Darling-Hammond & Ho, 2024). The reality is that racial bias in education is not imagined, but a real and present challenge.

Secondary Science Teacher

More than a decade after my middle school experiences, I returned to the classroom—this time as a science teacher. As a first-generation American, becoming an educator felt like a powerful act of reclamation. I was now in a position to support students who, like me, might be navigating school systems that don't always see or support them. One day, while walking through the main hallway at work, I heard someone say, "Mrs. Paddington" (a pseudonym). The name sounded familiar. When I approached Mrs. Paddington, I realized she was my eighth-grade history teacher, the only African American teacher I had that year. She shook her head as she recalled her experience teaching at the middle school, "That was my first year teaching, and I worked with all those racist women." She explained that she had only stayed for a year before transferring to a different school. Our conversation was both sad and validating, confirming my experiences as a middle school student were real.

During my nine years teaching middle school and high school science, I observed the continued implicit racialized assumptions regarding students of color. Racial bias in the science and math classroom can be presented in explicit ways, such as my middle school experience; however, it is more commonly presented in more implicit ways within the classroom setting. Implicit biases are different from explicit biases as these biases often counter one's espoused beliefs (Eberhardt, 2019), which means that when asked directly, science and math instructors might assert that they treat all children the same; however, blind a study revealed that science and math teachers exhibit unconscious biases when grading. For example, a study consisting of 390 math teachers, who were asked to evaluate students' math responses and math abilities, findings illustrated that when the teachers graded papers with a name perceived to be an African American name, they were statistically more likely to assess them as having lower math abilities (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020). And when assigning partial credit, again, bias was skewed positively towards White male names and negatively towards names perceived to be girls' or African American (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020). Additionally, African American girls are more likely to be punished for being assertive in class compared to girls of other races (Denessen et al., 2022) and less likely to be called on in math and science classes compared to boys (Gershenson et al., 2016).

These examples of unconscious bias in grading and classroom behavior have implications for student academic outcomes and self-concept (Bonefeld & Dickhäuser, 2018; Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020). It is important to note that research on teacher grading bias reveals that these patterns are not typically the result of intentional discrimination (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020). Rather, teachers' implicit beliefs—such as the stereotype that boys are naturally better at math or that Black students are less intellectually capable—can subtly influence their evaluations, often without their awareness. This underscores the urgent need to address implicit bias and promote equity within teaching and instruction.

Research illustrates that teachers' implicit racial biases mirror those of the general public, holding increased negative attitudes and stereotypes towards students of color, particularly African American students (Starck et al., 2020). In other words, teachers are a part of society and are not immune to the social imprinting from various outlets (i.e., family, media, society) that promote negative racial stereotypes.

As a first-generation American educator, I felt a deep responsibility to challenge these patterns, not just for my students, but for the profession. I knew firsthand how damaging it could be when a student's potential was questioned or dismissed. My goal was to create a classroom where all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, felt seen, heard, and believed in.

Teacher Educator

Extensive research reveals that racial disparities in academic success are not due to inherent differences in ability but from systemic inequities like unequal resource distribution, systemic racism, and a lack of culturally responsive teaching practices. Faced with these realizations, I asked myself: What are the potential solutions?

For me, the answer was to improve teacher training through integrating research-based practices. This realization led me to pursue and complete my PhD in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Science Education. As a college faculty member preparing the next generation of teachers, I incorporate diverse teaching practices. It is important for my students who are preparing to be future educators to recognize that educators have biases that influence our perspectives. Our worldview is influenced by society and societal norms, whether we realize it or not. It takes more than just wanting to be a good teacher to embody the skillset needed to be a reflective practitioner. Educators must adopt a growth mindset, be willing to learn and unlearn new ways of being and approaching

practice. Understanding how personal experiences, worldviews, and status in society impact how individuals view the world is an imperative first step to support all educators in identifying any underlying bias and taking action to mitigate its impacts on student outcomes.

At the start of my undergraduate STEM education courses, I use an exercise with four sheets of white paper, each with a phrase written in bright red ink: "ignore me," "listen to me," "respect me," and "disagree with me." Four student volunteers, unaware of the phrases, stand in front of the class holding the sheets above their heads. I ask questions, and the class responds to the volunteers based on the phrases. Afterward, the volunteers guess the phrases on their sheets. Some responses have included, "No one was listening; I did not like how that felt," or "It made me feel important because everyone applauded after I spoke." This exercise shows the power of unspoken messages. We then discuss strategies to promote inclusion, reflect on personal biases, and address the pitfalls of teaching marginalized groups from a deficit mindset.

In Fall 2021, a student asked, "Why do we need to even talk about social justice stuff all the time? I just want to be a science teacher and teach science." I was grateful that I had created a classroom culture where he felt comfortable asking this question, which allowed me to expound on how race, culture, and class issues are essential conversations when teaching diverse student populations. As a first-generation American, I know how powerful it is when a teacher believes in you, and how damaging it is when they don't. I expressed that although there is great value in academic content, educators must be keenly aware of social factors that might act as barriers to student engagement and interest in science and math subjects. When students' socio-emotional needs are met, they are ready to learn academic content.

I want my students to understand the social structures and negative assumptions contributing to achievement gaps among diverse student populations, such as English Language Learners, and Black and Latinx students. I support my students in recognizing these obstacles and empowering them to develop their sense of agency toward being educators who will advocate for and on behalf of all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I share a Nigerian proverb from the Igbo people: "*Ekwesịrị inwe ebumnuche dị elu maka ihe ọ bụla ị na-eme*," which translates to, "There should be a higher purpose to whatever you do." As a first-generation American, this

wisdom resonates deeply. My journey through the U.S. education system has been shaped by both challenge and purpose. With this in mind, I hope my scholarly work provides perspective and insight to those in and outside education. In our current educational and political climate, there are competing views on addressing racial bias within education. Some argue that discussing racial injustices is divisive and unnecessary, advocating for a colorblind approach in hopes that all teachers treat everyone equally. However, research shows that a colorblind approach does not promote equity (Aragón et al., 2017; Hachfeld et al., 2011). This approach silences the experiences of marginalized students who are negatively impacted by educators lacking perspective, critical analysis, and understanding of how biases exacerbate academic outcomes for racialized students. Although there are many polarizing views around race, a better understanding of human differences through dialogue and education can create a deeper understanding among people of different backgrounds. Because of this, I see value in my work despite the challenges; working toward equity is not always easy, but it is always necessary.

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Chapter Seven

Between Worlds: A Journey of Identity, Privilege, and Purpose in Education

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ABSTRACT

This reflective essay traces my educational journey from my early years as an immigrant in the U.K. to becoming a first-generation college student and eventually a secondary school teacher in a large urban public school in London. While I often experienced the sense of being an "outsider," I also benefited from privileges—attending a private school and adapting to dominant norms of success—that shaped my academic path. These dual experiences have deepened my awareness of educational inequities and the complexity of identity in schooling. I highlight the importance of fostering critical consciousness in teacher education and encouraging future educators to honor diverse experiences in their classrooms.

Keywords:

first-generation college student, immigrant experience, urban education, educational inequities, teacher identity

INTRODUCTION

The summer of 2024 marked my first trip back to Hong Kong in seven years. The whole two-week trip went by like a blur with family gatherings and reunions, although one thing that kept me laughing in the weeks after was remembering my mom and aunts bickering about how to fix the blocked drain at my grandfather's apartment.

It was an old council estate building after all. Back in the 1990s, I spent a lot of time here as a child when my grandfather and late grandmother took the roles of my caretakers while my parents were away at work. My mother would, from time to time, tell me stories of problems she experienced back in her childhood, such as going through times of water rationing and dropping out of high school to support the family. In comparison, I was very fortunate to have been born at a time when my family was in a more financially stable position. As a result, they have always valued my education, having been unable to do the same back in their time. They never let me worry about money and actively supported me through school and college. As a first-generation college student, I felt like my successes are due to love, resilience, sacrifices, and the history of my family, who came before me.

BEING DIFFERENT

I immigrated to the U.K. at the age of nine during the height of SARS as per my estranged father's wishes, who had long wished for me to receive a "British education." I was privileged to be placed in a predominantly white, private school in Edinburgh. The school endorsed a middle-class, quintessential British culture. Our teachers wore formal attires such as gowns when they were on patrol duty around the school, and we even had a green tweed jacket as part of our school uniform. Students took up classic British sports such as rugby and cricket. We had morning services, and most students took part in school choirs. Students were certainly expected to be busy and multifaceted.

I was one of only a handful of Asian students in the schools. The other Asian students in my cohort were mostly either born or immigrated to the U.K. many years before me, so I was initially treated as a "new arrival." In the early years, in addition to my still developing English, one of my constant struggles was not knowing many of the cultural references my classmates talked about. People would say to me "Oh, you didn't know this?" as if these things were obvious. However, whenever I brought up things from my Chinese culture, I was often

met with confused and questionable looks. It was like their culture was common sense, but my culture was treated as a foreign entity and diminished.

My name, for example, has been a source of confusion for my British schoolmates and teachers. My full name in Chinese translates literally to "Tang Ying Yeung" in English. In Chinese, the order of names is reversed to English, where it starts with the surname, then the middle name, and finally the first name last. However, on my British passport, my legal name is written as "Ying Yeung Tang." People have therefore often found it strange when I decided to go by Yeung. I used to have the other students asking me if I was going by my middle name. Not fully understanding the different ways names are written between the two languages back then meant that I would often struggle to explain why that was the case to my peers and teachers. I felt misunderstood and it was exhausting that I had to continually go through repeated conversations with my peers and teachers about it. There was also a notable time when a teacher even skipped trying to pronounce my name together during roll call and just called me by my surname. While I did not blame him for avoiding potential mispronunciation, he also did not need to do that to any of the white students there, and I couldn't help but feel that I was othered as a different cultural being to the rest of them.

Kohli and Solórzano (2012) argued that classrooms in Western societies are often bastions of Eurocentric bias and privileged white, middle-class norms, where nonwhite names become a source of inconvenience. Students of color experience othering and microaggressions through (un)intentional mispronunciation and disregard of their names in ways that diminish their cultural identities. While these microaggressions are mostly due to teachers' phonetic limitations and unfamiliarity, the impacts of these experiences should not be understated. Names carry the familial memories, love, and culture of these students, and such experiences undermine the thoughts and significance behind their names. These experiences are also cumulative and can lead to long-term, negative impacts on students' own sense of self over time. I have often asked myself: *Why do I have to be the one that's different?* There were many times I wished I adopted a more common English name, so I would not have these uneasy moments that required me to continually explain myself to others. In Hong Kong, a former British colony, it is not uncommon for people to adopt common English names, especially when they enter job markets and the business world. I wonder although, how does this then position these English names and whiteness as the norm to assimilate?

Surrounded by white, middle-class culture in my school, I found myself over time coming to see "success" as Annamma and Morrison (2018) put, "the closer we are

to the desired norm (e.g., white, male, cis-gender, heterosexual), the more likely we are to be imagined as capable..." (p. 72). I often felt I had to excel and survive in the competitive environment of my school, as I also did not want to disappoint my family who made the sacrifices needed for my education (such as my mother who left her home in Hong Kong in order to be with me). After many years in the school, I thought I did *assimilate* into this culture of "success" and became an "insider" with the support of my teachers and the resources I had access to.

BEING A FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENT

Upon leaving my secondary school, I moved to the little Scottish town of St. Andrews to start my undergraduate studies. By that point in my life, I saw myself as "British," behaving in many ways that I felt reflected the white, middle-class norms I grew up in. However, this was not how every student saw me. During my orientation week, when I was discussing with my dormmates what events to attend in our shared kitchen, one girl I was unfamiliar with advised me to attend a cèilidh (a Scottish dance) event. She added that she thought it would be a good event for me to "learn more about British culture," not knowing I have lived in the U.K. for over eight years by that point. One of the other students awkwardly interrupted and said, "He is from Edinburgh." I remembered that she then looked a little embarrassed and giggled over the matter before the conversation moved on. During my time as a student, I have been asked by other students, "Where are you from?" If I answered, "Edinburgh" (knowing full well that was *not* the answer they were looking for), they would pause and ask again, "But where are you really from?" As Ahmed (2017) said, "To be asked "Where are you from?" is a way of being told you are not from here" (p. 116). Our bodies become questionable matters. These questions become interrogations that question our belonging in the place. These were reminders that because of the way I look and the color of my skin, I would continually be seen as an "outsider."

As a first-generation student, I felt most of my family could not relate to my experiences as a college student and did not know how to help me navigate my way through the college system. Unlike back in secondary school where I enjoyed the luxury of having close mentorships from my teachers, I found myself rather lost. Being left to my own devices and expected to figure out things by myself, I started to recognize the privileges I had growing up in a private school. I was able to assimilate to what I perceived as the culture of "success" with the resources and close mentorships from the teachers I had access to. It was during those times that I started to understand the difficulties of having to navigate the college system alone without any close support.

As graduation neared, conversations between my peers and I started to revolve around life after university. As I was pondering the next steps, I managed to find some joy in my undergraduate studies through teaching. In the last year of my study, I impulsively signed up to take part in a special interdisciplinary course where students were assigned to mini teaching placements in local schools. I was placed in a local private school, and my positive experience there gave me the drive I needed to further pursue teaching as a career. I then moved to London to start my preservice teacher education there.

BECOMING AN EDUCATOR

After earning my certification, I started working in a local, public secondary school in the London Borough of Hackney. Unlike my previous institutions, the school has a very diverse student population with many Black, Asian, and other racially and ethnically minoritized students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. My lack of experience and unfamiliarity with the students meant that my first year or so at the school was marked by constant power struggles with some of my students. I was baffled when they did not understand what I thought was straightforward materials and frustrated by their defiance in class when I was trying hard to keep the classroom in order.

Noguera (2003) suggested that teachers are often too focused on controlling the behavior of students instead of critically examining why students misbehave in the first place and the sociohistorical forces that have shaped education. Looking back, I realize that I was one of those teachers. This changed when I started working closely with two of my colleagues. I remember going to their classrooms and was in awe seeing the positive relationships between them and their students, and it made me reflect on what was happening in my own classroom and my own approaches to teaching. After hearing them share their own experiences as educators of color working with students of color and the systemic challenges they faced and are continuing to face, I gradually came to learn that I had overlooked the many ways schools operate through sorting and socialization (Noguera, 2003), privileging white, middle-class norms while neglecting the needs of students (and educators) from marginalized groups. Unlike private schools, students in public schools are often not given the individual attention and resources they need the most. As Noguera rightfully asked, "When the social contract of schooling is broken or no longer operative for certain students should we be surprised that they become more likely to disrupt the educational process?" (p. 345). These students are left alone to navigate through a schooling system that continually works against them. I realized that I was not seeing it enough from my students' perspectives and recognized their frustrations in how schools

and teachers have consistently, systemically, and continually failed them. Back during my schooling, I was privileged to be able to access resources and compete by assimilating to the expectations set for me, and I believed that was the norm for everyone. Accepting this meritocratic nature of schooling as normal made me overlook how inequitable the system was in reality, and that it is not set up in ways that allow all students to succeed. It was the wake-up call I needed. I started to listen to my students more and try to better understand each of the unique circumstances they are coming from.

RETURNING TO GRADUATE SCHOOL

Over my years of teaching, as I continued to observe what was happening in my school (including going through the peaks of the COVID-19 pandemic), I gradually started to ask more and more questions: Why is it that racially minoritized students are very often placed on the lowest track? Why are students who are classed as "special needs" often from lower socioeconomic backgrounds? These questions pushed me to return to graduate school, hoping to find answers.

Going back to graduate school after years of being away from higher education was a daunting thought at first. After finding some initial successes with my master's program, I decided to apply to PhD programs in the U.S. to broaden my knowledge of education-related studies at a more international level. As I dug into my studies and readings more, I came to learn more about how traditional schooling operates in oppressive and dehumanizing ways that forgo the whole being of individuals. Western schools have privileged a very narrow set of knowledge and ways of being, particularly those associated with white, middle-class males. The rich cultural wealth of knowledge of minoritized students was often not at all valued in education or used as the basis for learning (Gonzalez et al., 1995), such as the ways in which my Chinese culture and heritage were diminished or dismissed during my British upbringing. I started to see that, perhaps at times, I was not so different from the students I used to teach, but somehow, I did not always recognize that and build solidarity with my students against the oppression we similarly faced. Therefore, I want to help create classrooms where students' diverse cultural resources are valued and extended and where their unique identities, histories, and heritage are treated with respect and given a place within the dominant school culture.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my educational journey, I cannot help but have a conflicted feeling about it. I feel like I owed it to my family for their sacrifices as a first-generation

student to have the meaningful education and the resources I had, but it also at times led me to overlook the inequities within our educational systems. While I do not feel my previous education has prepared me to teach in ethnically and racially diverse classrooms, I have been fortunate in my life to cross paths with educators from diverse backgrounds who were open in helping me reflect on my privilege and allow me to see the inequitable ways in which schooling systematically operates. Therefore, there is a need in higher education, especially in teacher education programs, to help students develop their criticality toward education and its systemic issues. This can be accomplished through sharing different perspectives and lived experiences and allowing these stories to act as windows for individuals to see the world of others, thereby motivating them to become agents of positive change.

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Chapter Eight

Unapologetically First: Embracing Identity, Family, and Academic Growth

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares the empowering journey of a first-generation college student who learns to embrace his identity while navigating the unfamiliar world of higher education. With pride in his roots and determination in his heart, the author reflects on the emotional complexity of leaving home, balancing academic expectations with strong family ties, and forging a new path in academia. As a student and higher education professional of color, he transforms challenges—including cultural disconnection and microaggressions—into opportunities for growth and advocacy. His story affirms the strength, resilience, and joy of staying true to oneself while pursuing academic and personal success.

Keywords:

first-generation college student, cultural identity, higher education journey, resilience and advocacy, student of color experiences

INTRODUCTION

Being a first generation college student means charting one's own course through unfamiliar waters while adjusting to both the weight and the pride of blazing trails for future generations. Both my parents completed high school but no higher education. By contrast, I am the first in my family to move out of my hometown and the first to be in a doctoral program. Enduring many of these life-changing moments "alone," my journey has felt isolated and challenging to navigate. I say alone; however, my family is a major part of my success as well. Even though my parents cannot help me academically, they have brought me cultural wealth through familial support and by instilling in me a sense of the importance of education since I was younger. Given that I grew up in a small, rural town in southern Texas, I had few education or employment opportunities. Understanding the limitations of growing up in a rural area instilled in me the passion and motivation to achieve greatness beyond what was expected of me. Throughout my educational journey, I have found that staying unapologetically authentic is the key to being successful. Being unapologetically first for me includes balancing my family and academic life while remaining true to my identity in every space I enter.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Growing up in a rural area, I spent most of my earlier life yearning for a community, a better education, and a place where I could be authentic. Seeking this type of environment both inspired and hindered my experience as I navigated my K-12 education. I would say this mindset hindered my experience because I felt so disconnected and dissatisfied with my hometown and with the education setting I was part of. Being a Hispanic in a town filled with people who did not look like me had challenges I did not ask for. I remember growing up, I always wondered why I did not speak Spanish if I am Hispanic. My parents and the older generations knew how to speak Spanish, but all the younger generations did not. I remember in elementary school that students would get in trouble speaking anything other than English. At an early age, I knew my parents did not teach me Spanish to enable me to fit the societal norm of "Americans speak English only." At a young age, I feel as if I was ripped away from my culture without even asking myself if that's what I wanted. Belonging has been a major distraction throughout my journey of higher education. I sometimes feel I am not Hispanic enough for not speaking Spanish, and then I am too Hispanic to be part of these spaces because people doubt my abilities when I am in majority white spaces.

CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

As a first-generation student navigating academic and professional spaces, I have encountered numerous challenges that have shaped my journey. In the workplace, I have faced subtle yet persistent microaggressions that often manifest as assumptions about my capabilities or questioning of my expertise. Colleagues have sometimes expressed surprise at my academic achievements or professional insights, and their reactions betray underlying biases about first-generation professionals from minority communities. Perhaps the most challenging challenge has been confronting the subtle doubts I have encountered in academic spaces due to my age and first-generation status. These moments manifest in various ways, from questioning glances during class discussions to implicit assumptions about my academic preparation. Having to constantly prove my belonging in these spaces while managing my own self-doubt has required significant emotional and mental energy. Although moments such as these are challenging, I have to remind myself who I am and how I belong in these spaces. Working in education, I find it important to be unapologetically authentic and take up space. When I reflect on the spaces I'm in, I realize these spaces were not designed for someone like me. Higher education institutions, with their deeply rooted traditional structures, were not originally built with diverse voices and perspectives in mind.

The complexity of balancing academic pressures with family expectations has been particularly challenging. While my family takes immense pride in my educational pursuits, they sometimes struggle to understand the intense demands of graduate studies. The abstract nature of academic work, the long hours spent researching and writing, and the emotional toll of intellectual labor are not always visible or comprehensible to those who have not experienced it firsthand. This gap in understanding can create moments of isolation, where I find myself navigating two distinct worlds without a bridge between them.

My journey has been profoundly shaped by the communities that have embraced and uplifted me. Latinos Unidos, an employee resource group at Sam Houston State University, has provided more than just cultural connection; it has offered a space where my experiences are validated and understood without explanation. Through shared experiences and collective wisdom, this organization has helped me recognize that my challenges are not personal shortcomings but systemic barriers that we can navigate together.

The Scholars of Color Writing Collective, a graduate student organization, have been instrumental in transforming my moments of academic isolation into

opportunities for growth and solidarity. In this space, I have found mentors and peers who understand the unique pressures of being a first-generation scholar of color. Our collective writing sessions have become more than just productive work time; they are moments of mutual support where we share strategies for navigating academia while staying true to our identities and communities.

Most significantly, my cohort family has become an invaluable support system, creating a sense of belonging that extends beyond academic collaboration. This tight-knit community understands the intersectional challenges we face and provides both emotional support and practical guidance. Together, we have created a space where we can freely discuss our experiences with microaggressions, share strategies for communicating with family about our academic journey, and celebrate our achievements, both big and small.

These support systems have not only helped me overcome obstacles but also fundamentally transformed my understanding of what it means to belong in academic spaces. Through these communities, I learned that my experiences as a first-generation student from a minority background are not just challenges to overcome but also valuable perspectives that enrich the academic environment.

IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

These experiences have transformed my understanding of both personal and institutional change. Initially, I viewed the challenges I faced as personal hurdles to overcome through individual effort. However, through my journey, I have come to recognize that while personal resilience is important, true transformation requires collective action and systemic change within higher education.

The microaggressions and exclusions I have encountered have sharpened my awareness of how institutional structures can either perpetuate or challenge inequality. This awareness has evolved into a deeper commitment to creating inclusive spaces for others. I have learned to transform moments of exclusion into opportunities for dialog and change, using my experiences to advocate for more equitable practices in both academic and professional settings.

My identity as a first-generation student has evolved from a source of uncertainty into a wellspring of strength. The cultural wealth, resilience, and perspective I bring from my background have become integral to my academic and professional contributions. I have learned to value the unique lens through which I view academic discourse, recognizing that my lived experiences enhance rather than hinder my analytical capabilities.

My journey reflects the broader structural challenges that students of color and first-generation scholars continue to face in higher education. The persistence of microaggressions and subtle forms of exclusion points to the ongoing need for institutional transformation beyond diverse initiatives. True equity requires addressing not only obvious barriers but also the ways in which academic culture can marginalize students from underrepresented backgrounds.

The power of community support systems such as Latinos Unidos and the Scholars of Color Writing Collective demonstrates the crucial role of affinity spaces in fostering academic success. These spaces do not just provide me with emotional support; they create counter spaces where I was able to develop my academic identity without the burden of cultural translation or justification. My success suggests that institutions should invest more heavily in supporting and expanding such communities. My experience highlights the importance of redefining what "success" and "belonging" mean in higher education. Rather than expecting students to assimilate into existing academic cultures, institutions must recognize and value the diverse perspectives and experiences that first-generation students and students of color bring to academic discourse. This means moving beyond token representation to create truly inclusive environments where diverse ways of knowing and expressing scholarship are celebrated.

The transformative power of peer support and mentorship in my journey underscores the need for sustainable, community-based approaches to equity in higher education. While individual success stories are important, lasting change requires institutional commitment to creating structures that support collective advancement and systemic transformation.

CONCLUSION

My journey as a first-generation student of color in higher education illustrates both the persistent challenges and the transformative potential of inclusive academic spaces. The microaggressions and cultural disconnects I have encountered have revealed how traditional academic structures can perpetuate inequality, even as they offer opportunities for advancement. However, through the support of communities such as Latinos Unidos and the Scholars of Color Writing Collective, I have discovered the power of collective resilience and mutual support.

These experiences have fundamentally reshaped my understanding of academic success and institutional change. What began as personal challenges—navigating family expectations, confronting subtle exclusions, and managing imposter

syndrome—evolved into a deeper appreciation for the systemic nature of these obstacles and the collective action needed to address them. Through my cohort family and other support networks, I learned that true academic excellence flourishes in environments that celebrate diverse perspectives and experiences.

As we consider the future of higher education, we must move beyond surface-level diversity initiatives to address the deep-seated structural barriers that continue to impact first-generation students and scholars of color. This requires more than just increasing representation; it demands a fundamental reimagining of academic spaces and what it means to belong within them.

Current and future scholars face similar challenges: their experiences, perspectives, and cultural wealth are not burdens to overcome but vital contributions to academia. Institutions invest in creating and sustaining meaningful support systems that go beyond token representation. Fund and expand spaces such as cultural organizations and writing collectives that provide crucial community support. Recognizing that addressing racial justice and equity in higher education is not just about opening doors but rather about transforming the very structures that determine whose knowledge is valued and how success is defined.

The path forward requires collective commitment and action. Each student, faculty, administrator, or institution plays a role in creating academic spaces where diverse voices do not just survive but thrive. My story is just one thread in a larger tapestry of transformation, but it underscores an essential truth: when we create spaces that truly support and celebrate diverse scholars, we enrich not just individual lives but also the very future of academic discourse and knowledge creation.

BIO

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Chapter Nine

Becoming Through the PhD: A Journey of Resilience, Identity, and Impact

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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares the empowering journey of a first-generation, international Latin American student who pursued her Ph.D. in a foreign culture. Confronting challenges such as cross-cultural adaptation, language barriers, and academic pressures, she navigated each obstacle with resilience, courage, and a deep commitment to growth. Along the way, these experiences became catalysts for profound self-discovery and transformation, ultimately shaping her identity and future career. Now working to support underrepresented students from diverse backgrounds, she reflects on the transformative power of higher education and offers encouragement to those who may be navigating similar paths. Her story affirms that perseverance, identity, and purpose can flourish even in unfamiliar terrain.

Keywords:

first-generation international student, Latin American scholar, cross-cultural adaptation, doctoral journey, educational resilience

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. The first aim is to highlight the importance of self-discovery and growth, including discovering my core values and personal strengths (e.g., courage and determination). The second aim is to discuss how my experiences as an international student and member of an underrepresented group (i.e., Latina) helped shape some of my key career choices, such as working internationally and working for institutions that serve underrepresented students, including racially and ethnically diverse students in the United States, Austria and Canada. These experiences further enabled me to better understand, advise, and support students from diverse cultural backgrounds, thereby providing me with an opportunity to foster equity and social justice in higher education.

PART I – CROSS-CULTURAL SHOCK

I will never forget the evening of September 30, 1988. I was alone at Rio de Janeiro International Airport, waiting for my plane in the large embarkation area. I had just said goodbye to my family and close friends a few minutes earlier, and suddenly, I was overtaken by this deep feeling of loneliness. It was by far the most profound loneliness I had ever experienced. At that moment, and without truly knowing what was ahead of me, I realized that I was saying goodbye to everything I knew, not only to my loved ones but also to my life as it once was.

My first six months in Miami, Florida, were much more challenging than I imagined. Even though I attended English lessons every afternoon at a nearby community college, I felt lonely, in a strange new environment without friends. I invested my time productively by studying for the Ph.D. entry examination (the so-called GMAT). Nonetheless, I was frequently overwhelmed with feelings of loneliness, missing my mom, my friends, and my life.

The initial phase of cross-cultural adaptation was the beginning of my self-discovery journey. Without realizing it, I was starting to understand and appreciate the importance of my core values (e.g., integrity, harmony in relationships, equity/fairness, social justice). I was also learning to accept and *respect* aspects of someone's cultural background that did not resonate with me, while embracing those that were beneficial to my personal growth.

PART II – STRESSFUL PH.D. PROGRAM

I started my Ph.D. program approximately one year after I moved to Miami. Although I had been studying English before relocating to Florida, my language

skills were not very good at that point. My cross-cultural adaptation process was still underway in this and many other aspects. However, the doctoral program provided me with something of my own, something to strive for, which was truly exciting.

Nonetheless, the harsh reality of stress quickly sank in. The day-to-day Ph.D. routine included classes in the morning, working for professors in the afternoon (most doctoral students qualified for a stipend, which required working for one or two professors for 20 hours a week) and doing homework for the classes, typically through the night. In practical terms, this meant that for the first three months of each semester, I started working at 8:00 a.m. and did not finish my tasks until midnight. During the last month of the semester, writing final research papers was so time-consuming that it would push these working hours even further, so I would work until 4 am.

My days, including weekends, were spent at the university, either in the classroom, the library or the computer lab. There was so little time left for daily essentials, such as cooking, that I often survived on fast food. The living conditions were also precarious, given my small stipend. Furthermore, I experienced significant inner conflict in trying to build a bridge between my way of thinking and being (i.e., my values, beliefs, and perspectives) and those of many Ph.D. professors. For example, inside the classroom, they sometimes focused on ideas and theories that were unappealing to me, whereas outside the classroom, they typically maintained a distant profile based on their belief that students should sort out their learning challenges alone.

My self-discovery and growth during this educational journey were exceptionally significant. I discovered key personal strengths such as courage and determination. I also learned to rely on these strengths to overcome ongoing challenges and focus on achieving the desired outcome (i.e., completing the program). Managing stress was hard for me, considering my high need for achievement. Still, I learned to persevere despite the complex academic and personal challenges, including the lack of family guidance (e.g., advice on surviving the doctoral program) and a gradual deterioration of my physical and mental health.

PART III – EXPERIENCE OF DISCRIMINATION

The Ph.D. comprehensive exam, after completing the coursework, was another unexpected challenge for me. My comprehensive exam committee, composed of five professors, sat down to discuss the outcome of my exam twice. During the

second meeting, two of them were impressed with my exam performance and recommended a passing grade, two recommended a non passing grade, and one professor was undecided. After a lengthy discussion regarding what to do with my exam, the committee could not agree; therefore, the professors decided to take a vote. The result was a split decision to give me an "F" in the entire exam.

Not long after the results of the second meeting were communicated to me, I met with my two closest professors separately to receive their feedback and advice. After speaking with them, it became evident that certain members of the comprehensive exam committee had treated me unfairly. Upon further reflection, I understood that discrimination played a role in the committee's unfair decision regarding my comprehensive exam. Therefore, I decided to appeal the decision through a university grievance procedure.

Although it was challenging to experience unfair treatment, I remained focused on completing the program. The grievance process took a little over a year. Ultimately, I accepted "a compromise solution" (i.e., taking a mini-exam focused on specific questions) to resolve the situation. Fortunately, I was able to complete the exam and return to the program successfully. Moreover, I was equally fortunate to work on my dissertation with an outstanding committee that provided excellent guidance and made me feel safe and supported until graduation.

The comprehensive exam experience brought me further on my path of self-discovery and growth. Aside from reinforcing the importance of core values (e.g., integrity, fairness), this experience underscored the relevance of cross-cultural understanding and intercultural competence in higher education. I also became increasingly aware of the critical role that faculty members can play in promoting equity and inclusion. Finally, I realized that I deeply valued social justice and wanted to commit to upholding the core principles of social justice, such as access, participation, equity, and equal rights, throughout my academic career.

CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING DIVERSITY

There were several specific challenges in my Ph.D. journey. Academic challenges were related primarily to high workloads. Regular academic activities, such as reading and writing, were arduous due to my unsatisfactory English language skills. It did not take me long to realize that I spent much more time reading papers and preparing assignments than my colleagues. Fortunately, I had a sound theoretical foundation from my previous academic degrees in Brazil, which was

very helpful. Nonetheless, as the first-generation doctoral student in my family, I did not have anyone to mentor me along the way.

At a social level, I felt isolated and experienced challenges in understanding and adjusting to expectations from professors, colleagues and even people I met in casual encounters. Additionally, I was learning what it meant to be perceived as a member of an ethnic minority group (i.e., a Latina). While on a personal level, I was doing the inner work (i.e., self-reflection and self-discovery) to determine what was important to me, I was also learning both the benefits (e.g., potential feelings of belonging) and challenges (e.g., systemic barriers) of being categorized as a member of a minoritized group. Finally, I encountered many health challenges toward the end of the program due to prolonged stress.

Regarding the support systems, I was fortunate to have the support of other international students. Together, we assisted each other in clarifying assignment requirements and key expectations of professors. We also provided emotional support for each other. Moreover, I received invaluable emotional support from my new partner (current spouse), who came to Miami to join me toward the end of my Ph.D. coursework. Her love, dedication and continued support gave me enough strength and stability to overcome obstacles and adversities.

IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

My educational journey brought me tremendous growth and personal transformation. The comprehensive Ph.D. curriculum shaped some of my beliefs and perspectives (e.g., the importance of exposing students to diverse ideas and people and the relevance of developing soft skills in higher education). The doctoral program also helped me acquire the critical knowledge and skills to pursue an academic career. The challenging educational journey further changed my sense of self. I learned to see myself not only as a competent person but also as someone courageous, determined and highly creative. Additionally, interpersonal learning enhanced some aspects of my identity, notably my social identity, including my feelings of being a member of the Latin American and LGBTQ2S+ communities.

The Ph.D. journey was profoundly impactful. During these years, I understood on a deeper level what it means to have *agency,* including the ability to influence my thoughts and behaviours, the capacity to make choices and decisions, and the ability to act independently with *intention and purpose*. This sense of agency became crucial in some of my future career choices, such as the decision to work in different countries and to join higher educational institutions that

serve underrepresented students, including minority-serving institutions (two universities in the United States) and institutions that purposely target students from various socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds (one university of applied sciences in Austria and one university in Canada). Because of what I experienced during my doctoral program, I felt better equipped to understand, mentor and support racially, ethnically and culturally diverse students. I became deeply committed to promoting equity and social justice in all my academic endeavors.

CONCLUSION

My Ph.D. story exemplifies the transformative power of higher education. Academically, as a first-generation doctoral student, I gained the knowledge and skills needed to pursue an academic career. On a personal level, I embarked on a journey of self-discovery and growth that brought me a deeper understanding of my core values, individual strengths and life purpose. Furthermore, my doctoral experiences and challenges helped me design a purposeful and impactful life. After earning my Ph.D., I focused on fostering *socially just* learning environments for all students by prioritizing fairness, inclusivity and respect for all. In addition, as a faculty member, I consistently advised and mentored underrepresented students and advocated for academic policies that improve access, equity, and opportunities for them. I continue to do so to this day.

BIO

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Chapter Ten

Resilience and Discovery: A Neurodivergent Scholar's Academic Journey

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ABSTRACT

Being the first in my family to attend college was both exhilarating and overwhelming. With no roadmap or familial guidance, I navigated academic uncertainty, financial hardship, and self-doubt. The community college became my gateway, leading me through unexpected detours in fashion design and merchandising before finding my true calling in education. My journey—from struggling student to PhD candidate—reflects the resilience, faith, and mentorship that shaped me. Along the way, I confronted systemic barriers Black men face in higher education, fueling my passion for advocacy and research. This story is not just mine; it is a testament to perseverance, purpose, and paving the way for future generations. My PhD is more than a degree; it is a commitment to those who dare to be the first.

Keywords:

first-generation college student, Black men in higher education, community college pathway, educational resilience, mentorship and advocacy

INTRODUCTION

As someone who is neurodivergent, venturing into uncharted territory has always been a mix of adventure and confusion. The idea of being the first in my family to attend college was sort of thrilling and a bit expected due to me attending a college prep high school, but it was also overwhelming. I had no one in my immediate family to explain the admissions process, the importance of a high ACT or SAT score, or how to choose a major that would prepare me for my future.

Despite this uncertainty, one thing remained abundantly clear: I wanted a career, not a job I loathed going to every day. Growing up, financial struggles were a very real part of my life. My parents were separated, and our household operated on an extremely tight budget. Even as a child, I understood the weight of financial insecurity; I also knew that I wanted something that would allow me the chance to experience financial freedom. I recall that even as a very young person, I enjoyed teaching; in fact, it was something I never questioned, as it was simply a part of me. However, I had no idea how to turn that passion into a reality because I wasn't surrounded by family members who were educators; there was truly no direction because I felt as if I was expected to have the answers already. Nevertheless, I began to ruminate on life after high school and what that looked like for me.

My academic record was not promising. I'd been a C-student at best, more invested in my performing arts school's creative pursuits than traditional coursework. When I discovered that the GPA requirements for incoming freshmen at my local university, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, were 3.0, I experienced my first wake-up call. Many of my friends had already mapped out their college plans, but I experienced feelings of hopelessness. One of my friends from another high school—a friend I'm still close with today, as we both pursue our PhD—told me about his plan to attend community college before transferring to a four-year university. That idea breathed life back into me. Together, we enrolled, stepping into an unfamiliar world with determination and faith.

Obstacles

Community college was an eye-opener. I quickly realized that I couldn't coast through as I had in high school. Even courses that seemed "easy," such as English 101 and the Tennis class, required effort. Surprisingly, after taking an exam to assess my understanding of English and math, I did not have to retake remedial math. However, I had to tackle remedial English and progressed on to Literature

101, but in the process, I discovered a love for reading, even though I still had an issue with writing. Math was even more daunting. College Algebra felt insurmountable, but with the patience of dedicated tutors and the grace of God, I passed. While I progressed through these courses, I wrestled with my career aspirations. Teaching was always at the back of my mind, but I also had a deep love for fashion. I thought, *I'll get a degree in fashion and teach*. Despite having no contacts or role models in the fashion industry, I felt an undeniable pull toward it.

After completing a year's worth of classes at the community college, my best friend and I decided to move to New York City to pursue our dreams. After all, we'd both attended the same performing arts school, and we felt we should give our dreams a chance. I enrolled in a university in the city, convinced that this was my future; however, reality set in very quickly. The cost of living in NYC was astronomical, and the part-time retail job I secured on Fifth Ave wasn't paying bills or helping me get closer to my dreams. That job was supposed to be an entry into the fashion industry by working for a corporation. However, after three years as a retail associate, I was still no closer to being corporate than before I'd left for New York. The financial strain became too much to bear, so I made the difficult decision to return home and complete my undergraduate degree.

Once home, my academic journey took a turn for the better. With my improved GPA from community college, I gained admission to the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. I declared a major in business administration with a concentration in marketing. I still envisioned a future in fashion—perhaps as a marketer for a major brand. However, as I progressed through my courses, doubt crept in. My professors seemed to paint a bleak picture of the local business marketing job scene, where opportunities were scarce, some opportunities required starting in sales, and some required someone to retire before new hires would be considered. It was disheartening. Simultaneously, I couldn't ignore the racial disparities I was beginning to notice in my junior- and senior-level courses. I was often one of three Black students in most of my classes and was often the only Black male. I started to wonder: where were all the Black male students?

Aiming for a PhD

That question lingered as I completed my undergraduate degree. It remained with me as I worked for seven years before pursuing graduate school. If I were to take this next step, I wanted to do so at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU). I explored options in both Tennessee and Georgia, ultimately landing on Tennessee State University for my Master's in Instructional Leadership. I was

eager to see more Black faces in my classrooms, but to my surprise, the absence of Black males persisted. Once again, I was the only Black male in many of my graduate courses. I wondered why this was the case and was bothered by the lack of representation regarding Black males in education. The question of why continued to nag at me.

It wasn't until I pursued my PhD that I found answers. My research into HBCUs and Black male educational attainment illuminated the systemic barriers that keep Black men out of these spaces. However, before I could begin that work, I had to overcome another hurdle—getting into a doctoral program.

By this point, I was the first in my immediate family to earn a master's degree, but was I truly prepared for a PhD? While working out, a friend mentioned that I should talk to her colleague. This colleague met with me over the course of a year, as she helped me process some of the things I was thinking through regarding doctoral programs. Seeing my passion for research, particularly research centered on race and justice, she and her husband felt I would be a great student at their alma mater, Miami University. With their support, I applied for the educational leadership curriculum and culture program. My first application was rejected. I was devastated. I questioned whether I could compete at this level. However, with my mentor's encouragement, I reapplied the following year and was admitted.

I am the first in my family to pursue a PhD. Three years in, with my dissertation on the horizon, I often reflect on how far I have come. The journey has been anything but easy. However, every challenge has shaped me, strengthened my resolve, and reinforced my calling. My experiences fuel my commitment to education and advocacy, and to ensuring that all students—especially Black male students who, like me, have had to navigate spaces where they are few and far between—know that they, too, belong.

I have no doubt that earning this PhD will open doors, but beyond personal achievement, it holds a greater purpose. Although my family may not have walked this path, they have always wanted more for me. This final degree will be a testament to their sacrifices and prayers. It is also a commitment to the generations of Black men who come after me, those who will look to my story as proof that they, too, can forge their own paths.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, I press forward, not just for myself but for my community. The students who will sit in my classroom one day who are uncertain of their potential to dream but eager to be guided. For the young Black men who will see in me a

reflection of their own possibilities. For the ancestors who laid the foundation for me to stand on. In addition, above all, for God who has carried me through every challenge, every setback, and every victory. This journey isn't just mine. It belongs to those who dare to be the first.

BIO

Philip Thomas is a third-year doctoral student at Miami University in the Educational Leadership, Curriculum, and Culture program. His major research interests include race and justice issues, FaithCrit, Black male doctoral students, and the intersectionality of Black student life and Christianity. Email: thomasp7@miamioh.edu.

Chapter Eleven

Pioneering Across Oceans:Navigating Adversity and Forging Horizons

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Abstract

Every first-generation student is a trailblazer, pioneering new paths for themselves and also paving the way for others. This chapter shares my journey from being a first-generation immigrant and college student in Hong Kong to becoming an international graduate and postdoctoral researcher and scholar in the United States in pursuit of my oceanic studies and first-generation dreams. Riding the waves along the way, I discovered the strength drawn from family, mentors, and peers, as well as the power of perseverance, of turning challenges into opportunities. Through this story, I celebrate the resilience and promise of first-generation students and the people in our lives who support us to transform and thrive.

Keywords

first-generation migrant, international student and scholar, oceanic studies, academic resilience, mentoring and support networks

AN INTERGENERATIONAL FAMILY DREAM

I was born in Shanghai by the sea and migrated with my mother on a ship to Hong Kong when I was around one. My mother told me how much I enjoyed the trip despite the rough sea. This is the beginning of my lifelong frontier-making journey. In 2004, I was accepted to the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) and became a first-generation college student. My family has valued and supported my education all along and sees me going to college as fulfilling our intergenerational dream.

My currently retired father was a factory worker and he saved up enough money to support me to go to college. I also worked part-time to supplement the coverage of the tuition. Working did take up time and energy that I could have used to focus on my studies. However, it also trained me to develop my time management and multitasking skills, professionalism, and work ethics, as well as my deeper appreciation for my family's support and story.

My father told me that he could not go to high school and beyond and wished for a different future for me. My mother also dreamed of me going to a prestigious school and being somebody one day. From a young age, I began to realize that it was during the Cultural Revolution in mainland China (1966–1976) that a whole generation's lives and opportunities were being impacted. That is why my parents did not receive much education even though they were very smart and could have done well in school.

My now passed paternal grandmother was the one who led our family's multigenerational migration from mainland China to Hong Kong for a better life. She was born in Indonesia, with our relatives scattered across Southeast Asia. After my parents' divorce and my father's factory was relocated to Shenzhen, China, my grandmother helped raise me in Hong Kong in a multicultural and multilingual household environment. Having received only minimal education, my grandmother would still help me with my studies in elementary school (or "primary school" in the British system) until I went to middle/secondary school when the subjects became too difficult for her. Yet, her being there for me during my early formative years truly built the foundation for me to engage in learning and studying.

As an anthropologist now, I recognize the importance of childhood socialization and early enculturation in shaping an individual. My family's care and wish for me

definitely nourished my interest in studies and growth that had been burgeoning since I was small.

My mother, though not living with me after my parents' divorce, was an even bigger cheerleader for my studies. She would attend meetings with my teachers and always praised me for doing well in school. She was an avid reader herself and I have always admired her intelligence. My mother could see my passion for knowledge. After I became a first-generation college student and continued to pursue higher education, my mother said that she would love me to be a professor one day. Her thoughts of professorship were admittedly idealized. But this was her expression of her love and hope for me to achieve socioeconomic mobility and security while doing something that I enjoy and making meaningful contributions to the world.

2007 was a year that I would never forget. After I was accepted to the graduate school at the age of 21 and became the first-generation graduate student in my family – another milestone accomplishment, I received a phone call from my mother, telling me that she was diagnosed with acute leukemia... The first semester of my Master's program was extremely hard as I was traveling between the hospital and my university all the time, juggling the rigorous graduate studies while feeling utterly helpless and guilty about not spending most of my time with my mother.

My mother passed away on Christmas Eve that year... A lot of turmoil ensued. When I finally had my head above water, I remembered again my mother's and my entire family's wish for me. It has since become a major driving force propelling me forward that no matter how many times in my life I wanted to give up, I kept going. I am embodying my family's intergenerational dream and strength despite them not being with me physically because of distance, divorce, and death.

Although hardships, like the ones that I and my family have experienced, are often difficult and painful and sometimes setting us back, they also play a crucial role in shaping our lives and teaching us valuable lessons about ourselves and the world around us. They prompt us to make mindful choices and take purposeful actions while deepening our empathy and compassion for others. Hardships, including challenges of becoming a first-generation, are thus the pathways to our enhanced self-awareness and resilience, and catalytic opportunities of growth and transformation.

THE MENTORS AND PEERS ALONG THE WAY

In the summer of 2014, I arrived in New York after having received a doctoral fellowship to start my Ph.D. studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). In this large city and port of entry where 40% of today's Americans can trace their ancestry, I became "first-generation" again in the sense that I, albeit not (yet) a U.S. citizen, became the first in my family to live and work in the U.S.

But unlike many of my counterparts, I do not have family connections and funding, generational wealth, a partner, nor secured social safety nets in the U.S. I learned to start everything from scratch by myself – from finding an accommodation to opening a bank account, setting up utilities, riding the local transportation system, and filing taxes. It was a steep learning curve. I not only needed to navigate the advanced level of academia but also the convoluted immigration system and a new society.

Like many other international students, I feel constant pressure and necessity to outperform in order to survive and legitimize my stay in the U.S. Meanwhile, there are, for example, major funding opportunities that I am not eligible for since I do not have U.S. citizenship. All the while, I need to keep handling the immigration paperwork perfectly to extend my legal status in the country while facing strict employment restrictions even upon my Ph.D. graduation. Although different institutions claim to follow the Equal Employment Opportunity Act regardless of the applicant's national origin and citizenship or immigration status, some of them explicitly asked if I need visa sponsorship and rejected me on that basis.

During these times navigating the academic, professional, and social landscapes and facing unique challenges as a first-generation international student, I would sometimes recall my background as a first-generation student and immigrant in Hong Kong – it wasn't the first time that I and my family were charting new territories and embarking on unprecedented paths in the face of adversity. My initial record breaking experience in Hong Kong has, in fact, led me to further actions and adventures that have shaped my spearheading spirit and strengthened my pathfinding perseverance.

Here, I also realized the big difference it makes for first-generation students like me to have mentor guidance and support through our academic and professional development. We tend not to be able to resort to our parents for practical guidance or advice when it comes to (overseas) higher education because they have

not been through such a process themselves. At the end of the day, we also cannot do it all by ourselves given the crucial role of recommendations and connections for upward mobility in academia and society at large.

At CUHK, I have met Professors who further ignited my passion for intellectual pursuits and research endeavors, and guided me in developing my long-term maritime project. During my first PhD year at CUNY, I enrolled in a course taught by Professor Karen Strassler who would later become my dissertation advisor and mentor in academia. I became a National Science Foundation, Social Science Research Council, Wenner-Gren Foundation, Center for Engaged Scholarship, and Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies scholar in the following years thanks a lot to the support of my advisor, other recommenders, and the reviewers. Such funding surely helped me weather the precarity of my status as a first-generation international student in the U.S. My advisor, in addition to being a knowledgeable and inspirational example, is also always responsive when it comes to our email communication. She meticulously read my papers, grant applications, and doctoral dissertation, giving me tailored and helpful feedback. She is also very encouraging and empathetic about my situation and offers the best support possible. Meanwhile, I am very fortunate to be part of a loving and supportive Ph.D. cohort as well who has helped me get through many challenges during the program, including getting used to the U.S. pedagogy at first which places much emphasis on students speaking up in seminars in addition to picking up academic jargon.

Against all odds, in 2021 during my doctoral dissertation writing period, I received the highly competitive John A. Knauss Marine Policy Fellowship after making it through both state-level and national competitions. I moved to the country's capital, Washington D.C., and was placed at the federal agency National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Ocean Exploration to work across its Science and Technology and Outreach and Education Divisions. My state and federal mentors who selected me said they saw something special in me – my hyperpolyglot ability and effective communication skills, international perspective and experiences, and cross-disciplinary, cross-sectoral engagement that bridges humanities and sciences, and academia and society. All of these are qualities and qualifications that I have developed being first-generation in multiple arenas, and I also increasingly began to appreciate and accentuate such established essence and presence of mine.

During my time at NOAA, with the support of my federal mentors, I became the first international social scientist to sail on the federal vessel *Okeanos Explorer* on a deep sea expedition. I also went on vanguard missions with a maritime

archaeologist colleague to Alaska for engagement with Alaska Natives, state officials, and academic representatives. As part of my professional development, I took the initiative to examine the interrelationship between international law and maritime conventions; national policies and priorities; and ocean exploration, conservation, and jurisdiction. These initiatives and mentorship support have invaluably opened doors for me and expanded my networks.

By the end of my federal policy fellowship, I have prolifically generated a wide range of science communication deliverables that speak to different audiences across the public, private, and civic sectors. In 2022, my NOAA colleagues and I also published a coauthored article in *Frontiers in Marine Science* titled "Broadening Inclusivity at Sea" and made practical suggestions for enhancing representation and diversity in ocean sciences, taking into consideration first-generation experiences among others. In my concluding post on the NOAA page, I also emphasize the need for diverse perspectives, polyvocal knowledge, and multidisciplinary expertise in tackling multifaceted, complex issues such as climate change as part of the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development.

All of these are testimony to the fact that I have been turning hardships and challenges into opportunities and achievements, leveraging the social support along the journey, while maintaining and furthering my connection with and passion for the sea since my birth and migrant voyage with my mother.

THE SEAFARER

Being a first-generation student means that we are setting off on a daring quest, and entering and exploring unfamiliar spaces with a purpose and mission like the mythical argonauts. This seafaring metaphor and materiality is deeply connected to my academic and professional work as well as my life experience as a first-generation.

In 2006, when I was a senior student developing my final year project, I ventured into the little-known port areas of Hong Kong. Ever since then, I have been studying the lifeworlds and lifeways of international seafarers working on ocean-going merchant vessels of the global shipping industry. People used to say that it was a niche topic until the supply chain crisis in recent years that has raised social awareness about our dependence on overseas trade. Through my unconventional boundary-transcending and gap-bridging research, I have been developing novel methods, concepts, and insights, calling for paradigmatic shifts away from terracentrism, sedentarism, methodological nationalism, and so

on. I am joining the "oceanic turn" in academia while also moving beyond its Eurocentric and Americentric tendencies. My work brings together sea and shore; Global South and North, and East and West; political economy and political ecology; natural and social oceanography; and science and technology (STS), infrastructure, mobility, policy, global, and Anthropocene studies. It took me across the sea and to different ports and higher education institutions all over Asia and the U.S.

I began taking initiatives and strengthening communities from my early days as a first-generation student at CUHK, where I served in the administrative committees of both undergraduate and postgraduate student societies as well as the Hong Kong Anthropological Society. As part of my Ph.D. studentship in New York, I opted to teach at CUNY Baruch College from 2025 to 2021, where I tailor-made courses to equip business students with critical knowledge and a maritime analytical lens to examine modern capitalism and economic globalization. I thus elevated the institution's commitment to innovative knowledge production and intellectual discovery for local and global impacts. My inclusive pedagogy also follows CUNY's institutional mission of providing high-quality public education to all students regardless of their socioeconomic, national, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, thus expanding the school's transformative higher education to historically underrepresented and underserved communities, including first-generation students. I also worked as a Writing Across Curriculum Fellow at CUNY City College (2018–2019) where I evaluated broader liberal arts curricula and provided feedback to faculty members and the college administration for enhancing the public institution's legacy of access and opportunity.

Meanwhile, I have been actively bridging the gaps between academia, society, and policy through my engaged scholarship. As part of my ethnographic research on international shipping, I provided direct care and support to seafarers at their liminal spaces at ports, and established connections with and across various industrial parties and stakeholders in the U.S. and beyond. I also actively disseminated my research findings through accessible publications and presentations at events, meetings, and conferences. My first-generation experience further motivates me to be a public intellectual sharing and applying my knowledge and perspectives for social education and communication. I have been an active member of various professional associations and working groups that advocate and act for social equity, environmental sustainability, and the planetary future.

During the academic year of 2024-25, as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the liberal arts school of Bates College – a pioneer of its kind in terms of its abolitionist and co-education origin, I am contributing my part of informing, inspiring, and empowering the next generations of diverse leaders. I am teaching interdisciplinary maritime courses with lessons applicable to real-world problems. Like my Professors, I have been serving as a mentor and recommender for my students, including those who are also overcoming their intersectional disadvantages and even turning them into assets sometimes. Not only have I led a drop-in session for first-generation students thanks to the arrangement by a fellow first-generation Professor Sarah B. Lynch, I have also been developing learning modules, giving guest lectures, sharing my pedagogical repertoire, and building and reinforcing channels of communication and collaboration across the campus community while actively fostering public partnerships.

For example, after attending an event organized by Atlantic Black Box, I and a colleague at Bates College, Professor Yunkyoung Garrison, took the initiative of walking up and introducing ourselves to a Native American speaker who is a member of the Passamaquoddy tribe as part of the Wabanaki Confederacy. We found out that she is a licensed captain and has a deep passion for the ocean like me. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, and our new friend, Ms. Minquansis Sapiel, has kindly agreed to speak at the Martin Luther King Jr.'s Day observance at Bates College, which marked a new chapter of the school's Indigenous engagement. I have been contributing and creating this kind of positive changes and connections that will live on after I complete my one-year contract at Bates College and proceed to a postdoctoral position at Cornell University, where I will focus on completing my book about the sea and power - in its various senses from propulsion to labor organization, governance, and resilience.

CONCLUSION

"If You Don't Have a Predecessor, You Will Be the Pioneer" has been my email signature for some years now and serves as my personal motto and guiding philosophy. Being a first-generation is being a pioneer – an originator and a leader who is confronting a seemingly insurmountable threshold of higher education and breaking new ground in the family and beyond. It means being creative and innovative, flexible and adaptable, resourceful and resilient, and even leading a new track and laying the foundations for others to build upon. It is about embracing the trailblazing potential of first-generation positionalities and also finding community and riding the waves of life. With the support of my family, peers, and mentors, and through recognizing and developing my inner strength

and life passion, I have achieved many firsts in my life as a first-generation student. And I am sharing my personal and professional experiences in this chapter with you the reader, including those of us navigating similar paths in the same boat – the argonaut boat.

Bio

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Chapter Twelve

Charting New Paths: A First-Generation Journey of Resilience and Hope in Cambodian Higher Education

Rany Sam
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ABSTRACT

This chapter shares my transformative journey as a first-generation student rising through Cambodia's challenged post-conflict education system. Growing up in a rural village in Kampot Province, I faced economic hardship, scarce resources, and cultural expectations that often discouraged academic pursuit. Yet, with resilience, community support, and an enduring belief in the power of education, I pursued higher learning and became an advocate for inclusive academic access. My story underscores education's potential to break cycles of generational poverty and uplift marginalized communities.

Keywords:

first-generation student, post-conflict education, rural Cambodia, educational resilience, inclusive academic access

INTRODUCTION

As the first in my family to pursue higher education, my journey reflects the resilience and hope needed to overcome generational barriers to access and equity. Born in a small rural village in Kampot Province, Cambodia, I grew up where decades of civil war had fragmented the education system and left opportunities scarce. I faced numerous obstacles from primary to upper secondary school, but persevered. I completed primary school in 1993, lower secondary school in 1996, and upper secondary school in 1999. After finishing high school, I pursued further education in Phnom Penh, representing opportunity and change. Higher education seemed unattainable, but through determination and the support of my community, I navigated financial hardships and cultural expectations to transform my life through learning. This paper sheds light on my experiences as a first-generation student, tracing a path from the challenges of rural Cambodia to significant academic and professional achievements. I aim to contribute to the broader dialogue on social justice, equity, and inclusive education by sharing my story. I want to advocate for systemic changes that enable marginalized students to break the cycle of poverty and access the transformative opportunities offered by education.

PERSONAL NARRATIVE

I am the eldest of four brothers and two sisters. I was born and raised in a small rural village in Chumkiri District, Kampot Province, 120 kilometers south of Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. My educational journey was shaped by resilience and an unwavering desire for a better future. Each day began at dawn, helping my family with farmwork before walking miles to a poorly resourced school. The dream of pursuing higher education often felt like an unattainable fantasy. A turning point came when kind teachers recognized my eagerness to learn and encouraged me to envision a life beyond the confines of my village. Many of my peers dropped out during lower secondary school, but I persisted, studying by candlelight or kerosene lamps in a home and local pagoda without electricity. My belief in the transformative power of education sustained me, even as I faced not only financial hardships but also cultural expectations that questioned the value of investing in a child's education, particularly in a post-genocide society where survival overshadowed aspirations.

The unwavering support of my family, combined with my determination, propelled me forward. When I transitioned to university life in Phnom Penh, I grappled with feelings of isolation and self-doubt, yet these challenges also brought moments of profound self-discovery and growth. Each milestone—from

securing scholarships to pursuing advanced degrees abroad—was a testament to the courage and resilience instilled in me by my upbringing. My journey illustrates the power of education to break cycles of generational poverty and transform lives. It stands as a call to action to create inclusive opportunities for individuals marginalized by systemic barriers and ensure that education becomes a pathway to empowerment and hope.

CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

As a first-generation student from a rural village in Cambodia, my challenges were multifaceted, spanning academic, social, and personal domains. Academically, my journey was arduous. During primary and lower secondary school (1988–1996), I walked daily approximately 3 kilometers along difficult roads, some near landmines from civil war battlefields. From 1996 to 1999, I left my village in Chumkiri District to attend high school in Chhouk District, approximately 15 kilometers away, as no high schools existed in my hometown at the time. I stayed at a pagoda during the week and returned home on weekends.

High school life has brought immense challenges. My father had lost his leg in a landmine explosion, making it difficult for my family to provide financial support for my studies, including food and the supplementary courses necessary for national exam preparation. Despite these hardships, I completed high school in 1999 and pursued higher education at Phnom Penh. Transitioning from a poorly resourced rural school to a university in the capital was daunting. I struggled with foundational gaps in my education and the overwhelming pace of higher learning. Determined to serve my community, I enrolled in a law program at the Royal University of Law and Economics from 2000 to 2004. After earning my bachelor's degree, I pursued a master's degree in law (2004–2006) and passed the national exam to become a lecturer at the National University of Battambang in 2007. Three years later, I furthered my education by undertaking a doctoral degree in Education at the University of Science, Malaysia (2011–2015).

Socially, I felt alienated. My rural background and limited exposure to urban life made it difficult to connect with peers. Financial hardships compounded the challenge, as every decision—from affording textbooks to covering living expenses—was uncertain. Cultural expectations also pressured me to abandon my studies to support my family. Fortunately, I found strength in support systems. I received a scholarship to stay at the Catholic Church Student Center from 2000 to 2004, which introduced me to a new religious environment and led to my conversion from Buddhism to Catholicism. Leaders, priests, and teachers who believed in my potential provided invaluable guidance and encouragement,

whereas scholarships eased my financial burdens. Although my family was unfamiliar with higher education, they supported my aspirations, sacrificing what little they had. Mentors and peers at university also offered a sense of belonging and wisdom that helped me navigate unfamiliar academic and social landscapes. These experiences taught me resilience and solidified my commitment to creating equitable educational opportunities for others facing similar adversities. My journey reflects the power of education to overcome systemic barriers and serves as a testament to the transformative impact of support, determination, and community.

IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

The journey of overcoming adversity as a first-generation student profoundly transformed my beliefs, identities, and aspirations. It instilled in me a deep appreciation for the transformative power of education and reshaped my understanding of resilience, privilege, and social responsibility. First, as an elder brother, I have motivated and supported my brothers and sisters to finish their high school and higher education because I firmly believe that only education can help alleviate poverty and contribute to Cambodia's economic growth. I act as a role model for the youth in my community and university to provide top priority to education. Each challenge taught me valuable lessons: perseverance in the face of systemic barriers, the importance of community support, and the necessity of advocating for equitable opportunities. Owing to my work achievements, the royal government of Cambodia has nominated me to be the Vice-Rector and Cambodian director of the Confucius Institute of the National University of Battambang and other positions. These experiences shaped my career as an educator and leader and fuelled my passion for social justice and inclusion. I now approach life with a commitment to amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, striving to create pathways for others to access the opportunities that changed my life. My story underscores the urgency of addressing systemic inequities in higher education, highlighting the need for policies and practices that empower students of color and those from underprivileged backgrounds. This serves as a reminder that individuals from the most challenging circumstances can achieve transformative personal and societal change with support and opportunity.

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on my journey as a first-generation student from rural Cambodia highlights the transformative power of education to overcome systemic barriers, cultural expectations, and financial hardships. These experiences shaped my

identity, instilled resilience, and reinforced my unwavering belief in education as a pathway to empowerment and change. From the support of mentors and community members to the lessons of perseverance in the face of adversity, my story underscores the critical role of equitable opportunities in breaking generational poverty cycles. My experiences demonstrate that with determination, community backing, and access to resources, even those from the most disadvantaged circumstances can achieve remarkable personal and professional transformations. As we strive for equity and social justice in education, my journey serves as a call to action to dismantle systemic barriers, invest in marginalized communities, and create inclusive pathways for all students to realize their potential. Education must become more than an aspiration—it must be a right and a reality for every learner. Together, we can build a future where opportunities are accessible, ensuring that education remains a cornerstone of hope, empowerment, and societal progress.

BIO

Rany Sam is a lecturer in educational management and leadership at the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Education of the National University of Battambang, Cambodia. He received his Ph.D. in Education from the School of Educational Studies at the University of Science Malaysia (USM) 2016. In 2017 and 2022, he graduated from the Royal School of Administration in Cambodia with diplomas in public administration, leadership, and innovation programs. He graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees in law (LL.B. & LL.M.) at the Royal University of Law and Economics (RULE), Cambodia, in 2004 and 2007, respectively. His primary research interests include academic writing for postgraduate students, scientific writing and communication, academic integrity, higher education research, and TESOL. Email: sam.rany@nubb.edu.kh

Chapter Thirteen

Stitching a New Life: A Journey of Redemption Through Education

Ting Du
University of Calgary, Canada

Abstract

This chapter documents my education vignettes as a first-generation college student from rural China and my intercultural struggle in Canada. Raised by beekeepers, my education journey is rife with economic and cultural disadvantages. The life stories in this chapter occurred when I was socializing in cosmopolitan higher education institutions domestically and abroad. They epitomize the transformative power of higher education for social mobility in Chinese education systems and cross-cultural challenges in international doctoral education. English-language learning in China is the needle that sews together stories as a thread of social mobility and identity development. This chapter presents the reproduction and resistance of rural female learners, hoping to inspire more of them to pursue equality, equity, and self-redemption in 21st-century China.

Keywords:

first-generation rural student, intercultural education, social mobility, English-language learning, rural female identity

Introduction: A Left-Behind Child

> In the middle of winter, I found there was, within me, an invincible summer. In addition, that makes me happy. For it says that no matter how hard the world pushes against me, within me, there's something stronger—something better, pushing right back.
>
> (Camus, 1954, p. 169)

In the 1990s, I was born in a tiny county in Shandong Province, the hometown of two great ancient educators in China, Confucius and Mencius. Shandong Province is called the Land of "Qi" and "Lu" (Qi Lu Da Di), which are the two ancient Chinese states in the Spring and Autumn Periods/Warring States Period (770 BC–221 BC). Education is our local culture and a religious belief that transcends parochialism and classism. As the younger daughter of a beekeeper and a construction worker in their early 40s, I am fortunate enough to have my parents' financial support to receive a good education until the current stage of doctoral education in a developed country. Although neither of my parents completed senior high school, they firmly believe in the transformative power of education, hoping it will become the door for me to step outside the village and establish myself in a larger world.

Unlike other kids with their wholesome family, I was one of 69 million left-behind children (Liu Shou Er Tong) who had to stay at home because of parental migration. As a child in elementary school, I was quite lonely with my parents working as beekeepers in the mountainous area, leaving me home alone. At that time, my elder brother was studying to be a physician thousands of miles away from home and was unable to attend to me. Nobody was around, no TV, no internet, not even a dog. My neighbor's family was my protector. I remember the lady knocked at the door to remind me that I forgot to turn off the exterior lamp during the daytime. I was so lonely that I remembered talking to myself, occasionally.

Motivation matters with language learning. Motivation varies for individuals, and mine was to escape from the left-behind plight and seek some sense of belonging. As a premature child, I was thinking of a strategy, trying to dissolve the anger, disappointment, and hatred towards my parents into something

else. Since no one would listen to me, I might as well have been speaking a language that no one in my family would understand. The irony was that my elder brother was struggling with learning English, and when he studied for his master's degree, he had to switch the mandatory foreign language subject from English to Japanese. To this day, I optimistically believe I have a knack for this language as a fortunate aftermath of the Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD). Enthusiasm, or blind faith, has pushed me to choose English Language and Literature as a major at the best language university in China, although my grades would allow me to be admitted to any first-rate university. After seven years of study and earning bachelor's and master's degrees, I chose to pursue a doctorate in Educational Research in Canada. By sharing my stories of English learning in China and Canada, I aim to address the sociocultural barriers first-generation female college students in rural China face to become educated and how English, as an influential cultural capital, serves as a powerful ladder to achieve self-redemption.

Did I Make The Wrong Choice?

Life was a twisted road for a country mouse to adjust to her new life as a city mouse. It marked the beginning of my socialization journey as a first-generation college student in a highly elite higher education institution in China. Soon, I started to question my choice of major and university. After the thrill of enrollment, I came to realize the enormous gap between my rural English and my classmates' urban English. Surrounded by classmates who graduated from elite senior high schools, I realized that we did not speak the same kind of English and that my rural English was technically inferior to their urban English. The English I learned is ridiculed as "mute English," the common English pedagogy in rural areas, which teaches students only to read and write well but without oral communication skills training. Initially, I was timid and reticent, unable to speak up in front of the crowd, overwhelmingly self-conscious of my accent and ways of expression. For the first two years of my college life, I was silent and invisible, sitting in the back row of every course due to a lack of confidence.

I had suddenly lost every privilege I held in high school as someone who nailed all the tests effortlessly. In Bourdieu's view, students such as those from the working class and students from the middle or upper class have different cultural capital, which has naturally been transferred from the high school to the classrooms in the language university, from the habitus of home to the habitus of school. Obviously, their English cultural capital is more transferable than mine because my English repository was seen as "inadequate," "insufficient," and "unqualified," and my learning experience in a rural village was not valued at

all. I did not expect the horrendous disadvantage when I selected the major, and neither were my parents' visionary tendencies enough to admonish me to be wary of such disadvantageous choices. There is a 16-year age gap between me and my elder brother—literally one generation of difference—so he didn't have much to offer when it came to the selection of college majors or how to adapt to college life. Not to mention that due to the huge age gap, we were never close to each other. In my rural high school, I had no access to college consultants who could have provided me with pros and cons when selecting majors for university. The helpful resources I could access were limited. My college life was gloomy, and I couldn't have known any better when I made the choice at 18 years old, all by myself. During many sleepless nights when I was frustrated about my progress in English learning, I asked myself, "Did I make the wrong choice?" I felt like the left-behind six-year-old child again, mentally paralyzed and emotionally atrophied to change my life.

Luckily, this is a bildungsroman with a happy ending. After four years of hard work and apprenticeship in learning English, with encouragement from teachers and friends, I successfully graduated. Afterwards, to continue my master's study, I was enrolled in the same major at the same prestigious university that holds the utmost reputation in language teaching and learning in China. I was fortunate to have had multiple opportunities to complete my internships in authoritative institutions like some Chinese official ministries, leading publication presses, and world-renowned foreign-funded enterprises. Beijing, as the capital city, definitely shaped my worldview and molded my character, making me confident enough to stop questioning my choices. Like Jay-Z and Alicia Keys expressed in "Empire State of Mind," "Since I made it here, I can make it anywhere." Maybe, at the end of the day, there is no right or wrong choice. The only right choice is the choice I have made. As a first-generation college student, I am fully aware that my anxiety and helplessness came from the fact that no one had my back. But that's okay. I can save myself.

To be a first-generation college student in a developed society means constantly feeling vulnerable, inferior, and unworthy. Transitional challenges in academic discourse are great opportunities for self-discovery, although realizing disadvantages can be cruel and disheartening. For first-generation rural college students like me, the culture shock is usually astonishing when the learning environment changes abruptly. Successful socialization requires not only brave self-discovery but also determined grit to catch up with high standards. Above all, one must never lose the courage to make a difference in one's life. God helps those who help themselves.

Race As An Invisible Ditch

September 2022, Calgary. I officially became an international student at a Canadian university pursuing a PhD in Educational Research, even though I studied English Language and Literature for the entire tertiary education. Admittedly, I was concerned that my previous knowledge, including my distinct cultural background, wouldn't be "sufficient" to support me in an entirely different education system. However, judging from my successful socialization experience in Beijing, I was mainly optimistic about my ability to overcome the intercultural challenges in a new learning environment, and in the end, I flourished in it.

My optimism turned out to be quite idealistic and even cruel to myself. In the mandate of the doctoral seminar, the professor brought out "race" as the discussion topic of that day. When my classmates expressed their unpleasant experiences, I panicked because I was unable to relate. Unfortunately, or maybe the proper way to put it is fortunately, as a Chinese woman, born and raised, the discrimination I consciously faced as mentioned above was never racial but was mostly economic. I heard about how Asian Canadians were mistreated during COVID, yet it never happened to me when I entered Canada, and it never occurred to me that I might be attacked on the street one day, just as my friend was. While I was racking my brain for any relevant racial incidents in my life, the class began to discuss the origin of the concept. I turned out to be more perplexed, and then I blurted out, "Isn't race just biological?" The professor, surprised but respectful, explained that race was more like a political construct to legitimately exclude and ostracize human beings using their skin color as an excuse. I was rather mortified not only because of the intellectual paucity, which was self-evident, but also because of the lack of recognition. The optimistic anticipation was in stark contrast to the cruel fact that the racial barricades sometimes took longer to cross.

Despite being a fluent English learner in China, cultural blind spots still exist for me as an international student in Canada. Despite being acquainted with race from news, social media, and literary books, there still exist experiential gaps I cannot fill. Afterwards, I learned that such a phenomenon is called "colorblind," which is both ideal for eliminating racial discrimination and racism itself because it denies taking race-conscious solutions to address social issues. Either way, racial knowledge is one of the transitional challenges I faced when I took up the responsibility of being a conscientious international doctoral student in Canada. For international students from "colorblind" backgrounds, the only way

to cross the racial ditch is to show more respect for the topic by enhancing our understanding of it.

Transforming Adversity Into Self-Redemption

For first-generation college students, adversity is an indispensable friend-enemy of self-development. Adversity can be beneficial if instruments of fate strengthen their power and resilience. There is a well-known adage from Mencius (1970), stating:

> When Heaven is about to confer a great responsibility on people, it will first fill their heart with suffering, toil their sinews and bones, expose their body to hunger, subject them to extreme poverty, confounds their journey with setbacks and troubles, so as to stimulate their alertness, toughen their nature, eventually bridging their incompetence gap and prepare them for the task. (p.150)

I truly believe in it. This epigram is the representative ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology for any underdogs who have successfully turned the tables of fate around. First and foremost, one has to embrace the fact that the world is not friendly, but full of traps and dangers. Secondly, one needs to realize that this uneven road is the exact road to self-redemption and transcendence. Thirdly, one must experience mental and physical suffering to overcome those setbacks. Lastly, one must believe that hard work will pay off in one way or another.

Challenges were mostly spiritual for me before and after college, considering that academic challenges were harsh but manageable because of the support I received from teachers, friends, and family. English was the light of a beacon, directing me to march on as a rural student. English movies and books were catalysts for my self-growth and self-redemption as a rural woman. To this day, my heart and soul are largely influenced by *Gone with the Wind* and *The Shawshank Redemption*, both of which I learned about in the middle adolescence phase of senior high school. Sympathizing with Andy, the wronged protagonist of *Shawshank's Redemption*, I was deeply sure of my adversity of being trapped and confined to a place I did not belong in. "Some birds are not meant to be caged". Andy's redemption encouraged me to fly across the cage with the National Entrance Exam as my wings. In addition, I am grateful for that movie because

it gave me "hope". Scarlett O'Hara was another aspiration for me to transcend the adversities. As a woman, she was brave, resilient, and honest with her desires. She always bore authentic hope for a better future. Her exclamation at the end of the novel, "After all, tomorrow is another day," rang true whenever I had to save myself from the abyss.

The living conditions of the rural boarding school were loathsome. Ten students crammed into five bunk beds, like shelters for enduring cold winters and hot summers. Teaching resources and curriculum design were limited and outdated for want of technological assistance and pedagogical innovation. No access to the internet meant no access to the sea of language learning resources. The learning climate was unhealthy, with students getting up as early as 5 am to show a hardworking spirit. *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* was out of the question. Pedagogies were standardized and centralized, with teachers transmitting knowledge to students, and reciting was deemed the most efficient way of learning. I excelled at all those subjects, despite longing for a change in life.

English as an Empowering Language

Although scholars have constantly criticized how English as a lingua franca has manifested the side effects of colonialism and postcolonialism, personally, I cannot deny the transformative power of the English language on my identity and my life.

English, as an empowering language, has provided me with spiritual support to forge ahead. Following the resilient spirit of Andy and Scarlett, I single-mindedly saved my life out of the tiny village. I became my own savior as the daughter of two farmers in China. Transcending the barriers of class reproduction requires both hard work and good fortune. Mastering English, the lingua franca, has been my best luck. It was the best choice I have ever made. When situated in a Canadian university, English, as the mandated medium of instruction and communication, has broadened my horizon of intercultural issues such as race, thus enhancing my intercultural communication competence and making me a more sensible human being.

The language we use shapes who we are. The language we speak legitimates who we are. English is my second language. After years of immersion, I realize that I am not only a tactful English speaker but also that I have acquired an English learner identity that, in many aspects, contradicts or diverges from the Confucian identity I inherited. English is a colonizing language, and English speakers are required to have a more open and proactive attitude. As an undergraduate,

I learned to present a different persona when speaking English. That scared country girl has to take cover. I need to play the role of an extroverted, self-assertive speaker. Years of English cultivation have naturally caused me to internalize all those qualities and be transformed into a different person. Once the English register is entered, I behave confidently. The two worlds I inhabit—a Chinese world and an English world—can be seemingly incommensurate but peacefully coexist within one person. English, the foreign language I speak, offers me more possibilities of seeing the world and existing in this world.

Conclusion

As a Chinese woman from a rural area studying in Canada, I have found the English language, as a form of cultural capital, has transformed and shaped my entire life. Pursuing a doctoral degree in North America is beyond the dreams of my parents and fellow villagers. The intention of this chapter is not to romanticize hardships or indulge in the false sense of self-victory. Instead, I allow the negative experiences to be transformed into hope. "Hope is a good thing, maybe the best of things, and no good thing ever dies" (Darabont, 1994, 1:57:25). My life stories can attest to Mencius's observation. Characteristically, millions of rural girls in China have made their way to social mobility by climbing the ladder provided by higher education. In the future, they should claim their rights and defend their interests in education. Educational resources should be allocated more to rural areas with not only policy support but also technological and pedagogical improvement. Every female first-generation college student should be encouraged to share her story to inspire more disadvantaged students. After all, higher education could offer more than knowledge or skills, but also the will to power, the will to survive and thrive.

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BIO

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Chapter Fourteen

From Resistance to Resilience: A First-Generation Scholar's Global Mission

Antonie Dvorakova
Independent Scholar, the Czech Republic

ABSTRACT

Coming from a poor, rural family persecuted by the Czechoslovakian Communist regime, I never imagined pursuing university education, let alone studying at some of the most prestigious institutions in the United States. Thanks to the Fulbright Commission, I began my academic journey abroad, navigating significant financial and institutional challenges with limited support. Yet, through persistence and purpose, I completed my education and returned to the Czech Republic to advance social and educational inclusion. Though disheartened by setbacks in institutional implementation, I remain committed to my mission. This chapter reflects the enduring strength of first-generation scholars and the global pursuit of equity in education.

Keywords:

first-generation scholar, educational resilience, Fulbright experience, social inclusion, global equity in education

Introduction: Navigating Hope with Caution

My story is nontraditional in multiple ways, including that - in contrast to many whom the completion of higher education assisted in rising from poverty, my Ph.D. degree so far basically enabled me to encounter even deeper despair in my home country. My childhood experiences (some of which I will mention below), together with observations of the structural and systemic racism practices promoted in the Czech Republic (CR), motivated me to study, research and teach in the U.S. how resilience and well-being can be supported within marginalized populations, and how diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging could be facilitated, especially in education and employment.

When I brought this knowledge back to the CR, I discovered that the work already completed toward increased inclusion of the Roma people, who constitute the most significant ethnic minority in the CR, had been abandoned. Our research team held an international conference, published a book, and submitted all resulting materials to the Czech Ministry of Education, which commissioned the project in the last century. However, on my return ten years later, the same problems that our recommendations were to alleviate were discussed, and relevant parties were not even aware of the existence of our project. And although special schools had been abolished, in which Roma children used to be concentrated as if they had cognitive disabilities, nowadays Roma children are segregated in standard schools. In any case, the legacy of forced assimilation promoted by the Communist regime lingers in the CR, impeding development of coherent and positively viewed ethnic identities amongst Roma people. Although Czech institutions have to declare support for Roma inclusion due to European Union (EU) pressures, Roma people continue experiencing in the CR levels of racism and discrimination that concern EU agencies, including the European Court of Human Rights.

I was hired by Palacky University Olomouc soon after my arrival from the U.S., and I acquired several grants for my work toward the improvement of the situation mentioned above, but the university treated the research funding as if it were their income, to be utilized for their own purposes instead (as I will explain in further detail below). As a result, after struggling for 10 years with such an institutional approach, embedded in the larger country-wide system that "turns a blind eye" toward these practices, I thus had to turn back to working abroad to be able to utilize my experience and facilitate social justice both in the CR and internationally.

Rural Roots and Educational Barriers

Both my parents attained only an elementary education, and my father died when I was 7 years old. We did have a house, because our father was a bricklayer, who built for his family an addition to the rural house of our grandparents. Our family was persecuted during the Czechoslovakian Communist regime because they were working for the Catholic Church. The regime perceived the church as a threat, because it used to be the most influential institution in my country (before the Communist regime targeted and almost completely destroyed it). Because I was evidently not able to afford things that my elementary school classmates considered desirable, including other than second-hand clothing, they bullied me. When I took a trip with another class, we got together with a Roma girl, who had the same "black sheep" position in her class.

Concerning my ideal future employment, a relative who had a high school education advised me to strive for an office job (of any kind), in order to avoid having to keep working outside. She said this because we, the children, assisted adult family members in growing our food in the garden and the field, together with collecting and preparing medicinal herbs for sale, and doing various other jobs to supply the income of our family. I got a job right after high school in any case, because the Communist regime prevented members of persecuted families from studying toward positions of influence.

After the fall of the regime, I was able to save enough money to afford higher education only after several additional years of employment. Before attaining any degree, when I was involved in developing the Czech national educational system reform to stop the inappropriate placement of Roma children into schools for individuals with cognitive disabilities, I recognized the need to include culturally specific community perspectives to improve not only social policy and practice but also scientific theorizing.

Fulbright and U.S. Academic Opportunities

My Fulbright Commission scholarship in the United States of America (U.S.) enabled me to begin learning how to utilize culturally specific perspectives in research as well as public outreach, and I experienced first-hand how my indigenous professors and classmates in the Indigenous Nations Studies program at the University of Kansas utilized higher education to build a better future for themselves as well as their communities. Because my scholarship was only for one year, although the completion of my M.A. degree required two, I used my

time-tested extreme frugality system and held two student jobs to save enough money to enable me to finish my studies.

The central university library, where I worked one of my jobs, was located at the top of a hill in Kansas. In the mornings, I therefore had to push my bicycle uphill (having no car) to work my first job in our department, then attend classes, study, and ultimately work my second job. After closing the library at midnight, I was so tired that I was able to get back to my place only because instead of pedaling, I was able to slide downhill basically the whole way. On my route, I had to cross a major road. Therefore, for the sake of safety, I dismounted and checked the traffic in both directions. Satisfied that all was safe, I subsequently began crossing the road. Suddenly, however, brakes began screeching loudly and cars stopped abruptly just short of hitting me from both directions. Indeed, I had to be tired - when I completely failed to see them.

What contributed to my exhaustion was, no doubt, the fact that while studying and then writing my M.A. thesis, while also working during my first time living in a foreign country, I was learning English at the same time. Therefore, I was worried that should they discover that I get lost as soon as people start speaking English fast, I would be sent back home with disgrace. However, because the U.S. academic system relies on written papers instead of oral exams, I compensated for my initial language knowledge deficit by writing with a dictionary. It turned out that my ideas were valued to such an extent that the remaining grammar problems were not a matter. In sum, since no one offered me a grade worse than an "A" throughout all my U.S. studies, and I caught up on my English unusually fast - just because I had no other option, my language problem was not discovered until I no longer had it.

My Indigenous Nations Studies academic adviser reckoned that because I liked research, I should continue studying in a Ph.D. program. In addition, since no simple solutions to racism and discrimination obviously exist, which I could bring back to my home country after just a couple of years, I kept working on ways to facilitate social inclusion and academic attainment in marginalized populations at the University of Chicago and Stanford University.

In addition to various small merit-based scholarships, I self-funded these studies because, as a non-U.S. citizen, I was ineligible to apply for large national grants, and I was excluded from all federal financial aid and support programs. Because I was not allowed to find employment beyond part-time student jobs either, the housing I was able to afford throughout my U.S. stay was in low-income African American and Hispanic neighborhoods. These experiences, together with my

history of facing gender discrimination, which is still rampant in many areas in the CR, and of the political persecution undergone by our family, equipped me effectively for working with people who had experienced various kinds of hardship.

Although I was technically not even eligible to hold a preceptorship position that early, in the second year of my Ph.D. studies, the chairperson of our department asked me to apply for and then accept this position, which entailed independent teaching and advising B.A. theses of the University of Chicago honors students. Although this job did not pay much, working it entailed waiver of the high tuition fees. Except teaching during the academic year made me unable to travel and collect data for my dissertation as fast as I would have wished to.

Working subsequently for the Stanford University Office of Accessible Education, I mentored graduate students disadvantaged due to their special needs and neurobehavioral disorders. I mentored students within an informal outreach initiative as well, and my creative ways of translating complex scientific language into common-sense terms to ensure accessibility were seen as key to success in both tutoring capacities. At Stanford University, I was also employed as a Project Associate by the American Indian Life Skills Project, which designed educational inclusion solutions compatible with worldviews prevalent in indigenous communities.

Resilience in a Foreign Land

After returning from the U.S. to the CR, I resumed my work with Roma people. Conducting research both in socially excluded localities and among Roma individuals with higher education degrees, I explored how insights generated in the U.S. could be translated to support improvements in life conditions, including educational opportunities for the Roma. I was employed by Palacky University Olomouc, where my full-time academic salary amounted to less than that of any of my part-time student jobs in the U.S.. This is normal in the CR, where early-career academic educators make less than any other teachers do, and teachers in general make less than most other professions do, although living expenses are not much lower in the CR than they are in the U.S. (while car fuel is almost twice as much in the CR, and heating gas is even more times more expensive). Therefore, people have to live in modest, frugal, flexible and creative ways.

I was awarded three grants for my research with the Roma during the past 10 years: two from the Czech Ministry of Education (MSMT) and one from the

Czech National Science Foundation (GACR). The GACR granted an extension to my project during the COVID-19 pandemic, to enable the completion of disrupted face-to-face activities and the conduct of my presentations at conferences postponed during the pandemic. However, the university insisted that the grant finances had to be spent each year according to the original plan, else they would have to be returned to the GACR, they said. Therefore, they alleged that when activities had to be postponed due to the pandemic, the institution had to spend the money for their own purposes, after which they would return the finances to the project, they said. However, they never did return the money to cover the remaining project activities. Therefore, I inquired with the GACR if an exception could be granted under the exceptional COVID-19 circumstances.

In response, the GACR informed me that what the university alleged was not true, as the grant finances could in reality be carried over across years until the very end of the extended project. At first, I naively assumed the university representatives simply were not aware of this, thus I was excited to hurry and share with them that there in fact was no problem. In response to which, the dean of our school himself initiated a call that lasted two hours around midnight, during which he threatened to destroy my work and fire me should I ever speak with any GACR representative again, and especially should I disclose how my employer was using the grant money. Because I would not submit untrue reports to the GACR, they did so themselves, among other things claiming that trips were carried out which never happened, that money was spent for relevant transcription although that served other projects, and that they bought a large amount of literature on New Year's Eve, although this was in fact an entirely fictional purchase. As a result of taking out of the grant an additional about a quarter of the money, for support they had not provided, and never returning it to the project, the university ultimately left me to complete the research activities and attend the conferences at my own expense, as an independent scholar. They claimed they would not be able to extend my employment contract to match the length of the GACR project then, but a few months later, when I acquired another grant without their support, or knowledge, they were suddenly ready to employ me again.

The first ministerial grant was lost because my employer would not submit documentation requested by the ministry to prove that the university was free from debt; they failed to supply it also after a reminder offering an extra 10 days deadline extension. Contrary to their promise to inform me of any issues, they told me about this only after it was too late to appeal the resulting blockage of the funds. The other ministerial grant was to support me in networking and conducting research abroad, and I indeed worked on the project in the United

Kingdom (UK) for one month. However, then my Czech employer attempted to withhold the funding they had originally agreed to pass onto the UK university according to the ministry's instructions. Although the director of the grant office at our school had confirmed to the UK university, in writing, that they would supply the finances for my research activities in the UK, after the UK institution agreed even to their terms that stated the UK university would receive none of the funds designated for administrative expenses, my Czech employer engaged a new, temporary employee, who slipped the UK university a document saying no money at all would be sent to the UK.

The Palacky University representatives were evidently accustomed to keeping for their own purposes finances designated for direct expenses as well as for support of research activities, because they already knew that Czech granting agencies would "sweep the issue under the carpet", and declare that they lacked the capacity to investigate and power to prevent such conduct (which applies to both the GACR and the MSMT). However, when UK university representatives were involved, they reckoned the funding should indeed serve its designated purpose. As a result of this institutional argument, I had to return to the CR without completing the two-year project. As I was gradually getting to know further people involved in grant activities, both Roma and other scholars, they shared experiences regarding how they were similarly sabotaged by the institution, and persecuted when they did not keep quiet about it.

Therefore, I applied for funding from an EU source; for research/career enhancement grant on which no Czech institution would lay hands, and I have indeed received this grant to be extended directly to another UK university. I found an institution even better in multiple ways, from its more advantageous geographical location vis-à-vis the Roma populations to participate, to supervisors/collaborators incomparably better positioned to facilitate the application of my UK research findings into policy making and educational practice.

When my Czech university earlier refused to organize the pre-arranged meetings where I would share my Czech research results with policy makers, and they instead alleged in the funding report that the meetings had already taken place, while the GACR failed to check, or care that this was untrue, it seemed that the dissemination of my Czech research findings would be limited to the Roma community meetings that I organized myself. However, when I will be able to use the research I had already conducted with the Czech Roma people and compare its results with those I will obtain in the UK, both Czech and UK populations

will benefit from this joint endeavor more than any could have from the Czech project alone.

All in all, it seems that I will ultimately have much better conditions for conducting my work, and its outcomes will be more profound under the new circumstances. However, while I was waiting to hear whether or not I would receive the EU funding, spending all my savings during the time I was unemployed without benefits, I was diagnosed with a light variant of posttraumatic stress disorder. Having assumed that such disorder applies only in war or to people who had lived through a natural catastrophe, it took me some time to admit that, in my case, the cause was what was supposed to be generally uneventful employment. I cannot imagine how hard dealing with such circumstances would be for people who would be caring for children at the same time.

Persistence, Equity, and Global Commitment

Since I have no children, the struggle to ensure that further generations of people from disadvantaged backgrounds have better chances and face fewer obstacles than I did, and that they are able to realize their full potential, has evidently become my life-mission. The latter is notable because U.S. colleagues with working-class backgrounds testify that a person from such circumstances would never enjoy life conditions truly equal to those pertaining to colleagues with affluent backgrounds, and that no matter how hard they work and how well they do, and even if they do have U.S. jobs and salaries.

In any case, when it appeared I would be unable to make the desired difference in the CR, and that not even because of the prevailing systemic racism but rather because of my employer's preference for diverting research funding over facilitating quality science (not to mention its practical applications), it seemed that the story of my life might have been, in a sense, one of lots of efforts naively extended in vain. In that case, the moral of my example might be that even if the highest levels of education at the best universities are attained, all this does not ensure that first-generation students would be able to make the desirable difference, and that not only in their professional endeavors but also in their personal life circumstances. From the material point of view, if my life changed, then not quite for the better - as I am now again living in the house our father built decades ago, helping to care for our physically disabled mother, except now the house is in need of repairs that we cannot afford.

However, the crucial difference resulting specifically from my U.S. experiences is that I will never yield to coercion, and never again be persuaded that I should not be good enough, including that I should be less worthy just because I am a woman (as opposed to a man, as I was taught in my childhood). As a result of my higher education as well as other experiences in the U.S., now I know that everyone deserves better, equitable chances. In addition, should everything work out as expected regarding my UK research project and its follow-up, even my life-long work toward equity and inclusion of marginalized populations, especially in higher education, will eventually bear fruit. My ultimate professional goal is to find an institution open to supporting a cultural psychology research group to work specifically with racialized/indigenous, marginalized, low-income, and otherwise vulnerable populations.

Bio:

Dr. Antonie Dvorakova is an independent scholar whose research spans the United States and the Czech Republic, focusing on resilience and well-being among Indigenous, Roma, and other marginalized populations. Trained at Masaryk University, the University of Kansas, the University of Chicago, and Stanford University, her work examines the intersection of psychology, culture, and structural adversity to inform inclusive, culturally grounded interventions. Contact: antonie.dvorakova@fulbrightmail.org

Chapter Fifteen

Embracing New Horizons: A First-Generation Journey from Benin to the U.S.

Oumarou Abdoulaye Balarabe
Ohio University, USA

Abstract

This chapter chronicles my inspiring journey as the first in my family to pursue and complete a college degree. Growing up in northern Benin, where cultural expectations often overshadowed academic ambitions, I held tightly to the dream of education. With resilience, scholarship support, and unwavering encouragement from my family, I moved from Malanville to southern Benin and eventually to the United States on a Fulbright scholarship. My experiences reaffirm the life-changing power of education and highlight the importance of global support for first-generation students. This story serves as a call to expand inclusive, equitable opportunities that empower students to reach their full potential, wherever they begin.

Keywords:
first-generation college student, Fulbright scholar, educational resilience, global mobility, equity in education

Introduction

Being the first in my family to attend college and earn a degree meant breaking barriers by traveling a road less traveled by millions worldwide. In northern Benin, where I was born and raised, cultural norms and financial constraints overshadowed the notion of pursuing higher education for many students. In a region where agricultural labor and informal trades were sometimes prioritized over formal schooling, education beyond primary levels felt like a distant privilege. Families, including my own, grappled with the immediate need to contribute to household incomes, leaving little room for investment in long-term academic aspirations. Despite these challenges, I dreamt of a future where education could unlock opportunities for myself and others.

This essay shares my journey as a first-generation college student. I highlight the challenges I faced, the resilience I developed, the societal skepticism of the value of Western education, and the ability to overcome the loneliness of being a trailblazer as a first-generation college student. These struggles forged a resilience that became my greatest asset. Through scholarships, part-time work, family encouragement, and the support of teachers who recognized my potential, I gradually carved a path forward. Each milestone, from graduating high school, securing university admission, eventually earning my degree, and obtaining a Fulbright scholarship, felt like a collective victory for me and my family and a beacon of hope for my peers.

By sharing this narrative, I aim to inspire others and contribute to ongoing conversations about social justice, equity, and the critical role of education in promoting social mobility. While my story is not unique, it is singular in its affirmation that transformative change begins with access to opportunity. I witnessed firsthand how education empowered me to challenge stereotypes, advocate for marginalized voices, and reimagine my role in society. My experience as a first-generation college student illuminates the resilience of those who dare to envision a different future. Education does not just shape individuals; it transforms communities, redefines cultures, and bridges the gap between what is and what could be.

Personal Narrative

I grew up in the small and lively town of Malanville in northern Benin. Malanville shares borders with Nigeria and Niger. I completed my kindergarten, primary, and secondary schooling in my hometown. My parents, although supportive, did not go through formal Western education themselves. In fact, neither my

mother nor my father went to school, which made me a first-generation college student. Therefore, my parents could only offer encouragement rather than direct guidance. As the youngest child on my mother's side and with other younger siblings looking up to me on my father's side, I bore the weight of high expectations while also carrying the burden of charting an unknown path.

As a child and student from kindergarten to primary school, I spent my evenings studying under the dim glow of a kerosene lamp and walking to school every day, which is evidence of the challenges faced by many first-generation students in under-resourced communities worldwide. My academic journey began in overcrowded classrooms where resources were scarce, but aspirations were high. Teachers often encouraged me to excel, and they recognized my potential. Their belief in me planted seeds of confidence, nurtured hope, and fueled aspirations and dreams that would sustain me through future challenges.

After passing my national *baccalauréat* exam (end of high school exam in many French-speaking countries in Africa) with honors in 2009, I gained admission to the Université d'Abomey-Calavi (UAC) in 2010, which is located in southern Benin. UAC is the largest form of public higher education in the country, with over 60,000 students. It is also used by students from all 12 different regions in Benin, including some international students from neighboring countries such as Nigeria, Niger, Togo, and Burkina-Faso. Going to UAC included mixed feelings of pride, accomplishment, and anxiety. I was leaving home for the first time to venture into an unfamiliar environment with limited financial resources, which was exciting and very scary.

My time at the university was marked by long nights of studying, paying for tutorials, studying in groups with friends, and being involved in student organizations. The lack of a new student orientation, overcrowded classes, and a large gap in the faculty–student ratio made UAC a challenging learning environment. For example, in my first year as an undergraduate student, there were over 4,000 students in my English Department cohort, which created significant challenges in sustaining meaningful student-faculty interaction, competing for faculty advising, and navigating the overwhelming social and academic environment. In addition, I had to balance academic demands while moving from one part-time job to another to support myself. Despite the numerous difficulties I faced, I navigated my new environment and thrived academically, socially, and psychologically. I was determined to improve my conditions, honor my family's sacrifices, and serve as a role model for younger siblings and students in my communities.

I completed my fourth year at UAC in 2013 but did not defend my undergraduate thesis until 2015 because of bureaucracy and faculty availability to supervise my thesis writing. However, a pivotal moment came in 2016 when I received a Fulbright scholarship to pursue a master's degree in the United States. Leaving Benin for the U.S. was both exciting and overwhelming. The cultural differences were stark, ranging from the educational system to how people behaved and communicated. However, I embraced the challenges because I was determined to make the most of this opportunity.

Thriving Through Challenges

As a first-generation college student, navigating higher education in two vastly different systems and countries constituted unique challenges. In Benin, for example, financial constraints meant that I often had to improvise, borrow books or rely on peers for notes, and juggle several part-time jobs while meeting academic demands. However, in the U.S., the challenges shifted to cultural and academic adjustments.

In America, I had to learn to navigate both mainstream U.S. and academic cultures. Language was somewhat of a barrier. Even though I was fluent in English, academic writing required a level of fluency and mastery of certain conventions as well as standards that took me time to master. I often spent significant time in the library, where I immersed myself in English-language texts to improve my skills. Moreover, I sought help from university writing centers, where I worked with several writing tutors to obtain feedback on my written assignments. I attended and actively participated in many English conversation hours organized by the university's intensive English program. I also signed up and was paired with a conversation partner, with whom I regularly attended various fun activities, including coffee, tea, movies, and hiking.

Another challenge was the lack of representation. As a Beninese, Black, and international student at a predominantly White institution, I often felt the weight of being the "only one" in classrooms and professional spaces. From 2016 to 2023, I was the only international student from Benin at my university. This isolation was often intensified by the pressure to succeed, particularly because my journey represented not just my aspirations but also those of my family and community.

Support systems played a crucial role in helping me negotiate and navigate higher education and thrive through the challenges I faced as a first-generation college student. Mentors, both in Benin and the U.S., provided guidance and encouragement. My Fulbright and academic advisors helped me understand

academic requirements and navigate challenges. The various peers I met through student organizations, such as the African Students' Union, International Students' Union, and Fulbright Scholars' Association, became a source of emotional support. Finally, back home, the unconditional support from my family, friends, and former teachers, as well as their belief in me, motivated me to keep going.

Impact and Transformation

The journey of being a first-generation college student transformed not only my life but also my perspective on education and equity. Each challenge I faced reinforced the importance of resilience and adaptability. I learned to see obstacles as opportunities for growth, a growth mindset that continues to inform my personal and professional life.

Education opened doors I never imagined could be opened. Today, as a doctoral candidate in higher education and student affairs, I am committed to using my experiences to support others. My research focuses on student thriving and equity in education, which are themes deeply rooted in my personal journey. As an African, Black male, international, and first-generation college student in a PhD program, I acknowledge the privileged space I occupy and the work that others before me have done. My commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion is driven by a desire to challenge and transform systemic inequities for others who may come after me. I strive to provide and share opportunities with other students, as was done for me. I endeavor to open doors for other students with similar historically minoritized and marginalized identities, just as my advocates did for me, to show them that they, too, belong in higher education.

Beyond academics, my experiences have shaped my identity and beliefs. I now see myself as a bridge between cultures, advocating for the needs of first-generation college students and international students. My journey also highlights the importance of systemic change in higher education, from providing financial support to fostering inclusive environments where all students can thrive academically, socially, and psychologically.

Conclusion

My experience as a first-generation college student demonstrates the transformative power of education. From my humble beginnings in northern Benin to my current role as an international scholar and advocate, each step of my journey has been marked by challenges, resilience, opportunities, and growth. This story is not just mine but also a reflection of the countless first-generation

students worldwide who dare to dream of a better future. My story is also that of millions of international students who dare to travel a road less travelled by many in their families and communities. Both first-generation and international college students carry their families' and communities' hopes, dreams, and aspirations by embarking on their higher education and international education journeys. Finally, my story is a call for action to educators, policymakers, and institutions to invest in equitable access to education to ensure that every student, regardless of their background, can access education, succeed, and thrive.

BIO

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Vol. 1

First in the Family: *Global Narratives of First-Generation College Journeys* is a powerful collection of personal stories from first-generation college students and scholars around the world. Edited by Dr. Courtney Brown, Dr. Krishna Bista, and Dr. Uttam Gaulee, this volume explores transformative experiences shaped by identity, migration, mentorship, and perseverance. From rural communities to global universities, these narratives illuminate the challenges and triumphs of those who dared to chart new paths in higher education. This inspiring book affirms the legacy of first-generation scholars and calls for inclusive practices that uplift future generations of learners and leaders.

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