

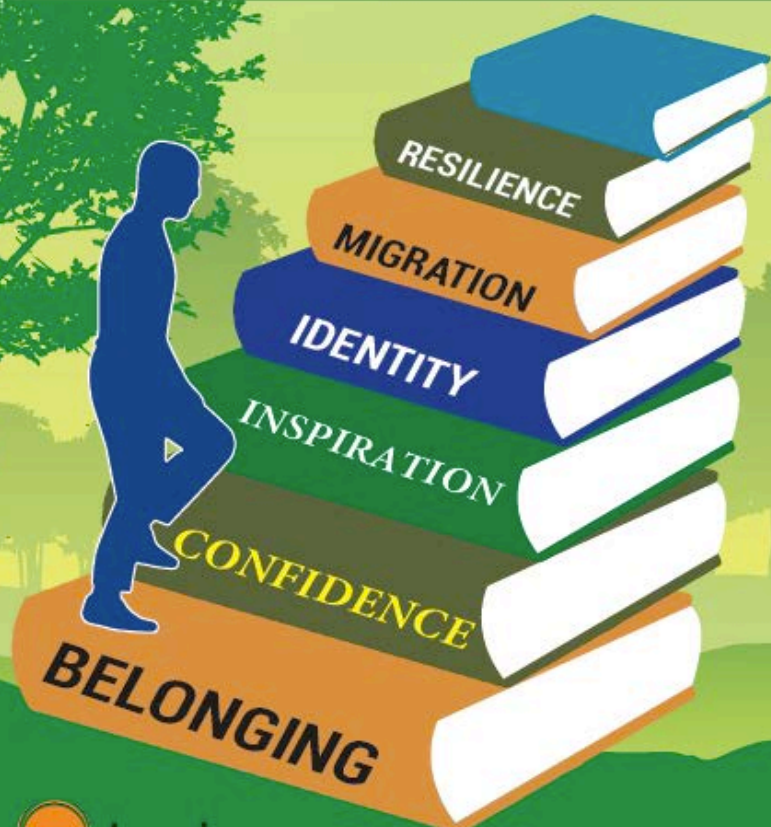
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# The First in the Family

Stories of Resilience, Leadership, and Transformation Across Borders

Edited by Krishna Bista, Courtney Brown, Uttam Gaulee



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NETWORK

Vol. 2

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# Praise for this book

*“An inspiring collection that illuminates the resilience and ingenuity of first-generation scholars across the globe. These narratives remind us why equity in education is a universal imperative.”* ~ **Maureen Manning**, Founder, The Global Nexus Collective

*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 Navarra, 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

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# About the Book

## First in the Family: Stories of Resilience, Leadership, and Transformation Across Borders

*First in the Family: Stories of Resilience, Leadership, and Transformation Across Borders* showcases the lived experiences of first-generation students whose journeys span cultures, continents, and disciplines. Through narratives of perseverance and identity, contributors share how they navigated barriers of poverty, migration, discrimination, and uncertainty to achieve educational success and leadership. From classrooms and research labs to communities and cultural spaces, their voices highlight the profound ways education transforms not only individuals but also families and societies. Both inspiring and instructive, this volume is an invaluable resource for students, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand and support the first-generation experience in a global context.

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# First in the Family

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Stories of Resilience, Leadership, and  
Transformation Across Borders

Krishna Bista  
Courtney Brown  
Uttam Gaulee

STAR SCHOLARS PRESS

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Their dedication and expertise have been pivotal in realizing this project, and their efforts are gratefully acknowledged.

Editors

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# 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
5. *Current Perspectives on Intercultural and Global Competence*, By Darla K. Deardorff, Mizuho Tatebayashi
6. *The International Handbook of French Education: Language Learning, Teaching and Advocacy*, By Jerry L. Parker, Amany Saleh

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# Introduction: Who Is First in the Family?

**Krishna Bista**

*Morgan State University*

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*First in the Family* showcases the lived experiences of first-generation students whose journeys span cultures, continents, and disciplines. Through narratives of perseverance and identity, contributors share how they navigated barriers of poverty, migration, discrimination, and uncertainty to achieve educational success and leadership. From classrooms and research labs to communities and cultural spaces, their voices highlight the profound ways education transforms not only individuals but also families and societies. Both inspiring and instructive, this volume is an invaluable resource for students, educators, and policymakers seeking to understand and support the first-generation experience in a global context

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 Mkwanzani (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.

*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

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# From Identity to Calling

## A First-Generation Journey Toward Scholarship and Purpose

Radomir Ray Mitic  
*William & Mary, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter shares the uplifting journey of a first-generation college student and child of immigrants who rose from humble beginnings to become a faculty scholar and advocate for educational equity. Guided by the encouragement of family and teachers, the author discovered a strong sense of voice, purpose, and belonging in higher education. Through an asset-based lens, this narrative illustrates how early support and high expectations can empower first-generation students to thrive academically and personally, and inspire them to give back through teaching, research, and mentorship. The chapter affirms that when educators nurture students' identities and aspirations, they help cultivate leaders committed to advancing justice, inclusion, and opportunity for future generations.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation college student, child of immigrants, educational equity, asset-based approach, mentorship and leadership

## **INTRODUCTION**

In many countries, my story would not be possible. My parents who completed a third- and eighth-grade education in Serbia came to the United States in the 1970s with a dream of starting a family and setting up future generations for success. Settling in Chicago, they set out to have their son have every opportunity to attend university for vertical mobility. Through personal sacrifice and faith in the U.S. education system, they succeeded. In this chapter, I chart my journey from the child of immigrants to first-generation college student, to faculty member and scholar who centers first-generation and racially minoritized students in his research and service.

## **PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

I first heard the phrase “first-generation college student” in high school when I was preparing personal statements for college. While I knew that many of my classmates had parents who attended college, it did not dawn on me that there was anything particularly different between us. We went to the same schools, took the same classes, completed the same assignments, and applied to many of the same colleges. During my senior year of high school, I discovered that I had a lot to learn. Our high school gave seniors a college visit day when other students were taking standardized tests. I drove to Evanston, Illinois, to visit my dream school, Northwestern University. Once I arrived on campus, I realized that I did not know what to do. Do I just walk to the admissions office? How do I get a campus tour? Luckily, I ran into a classmate with her family who had a full schedule. They saw that I looked a bit lost and invited me along. While my parents were my biggest supporters for me to go to college, they were not able to do college visits with me. My father, who was an hourly worker without paid personal leave, could not afford to take the day off work since he focused on helping me to pay for college.

Although Northwestern was my first choice for college, I enrolled at the right college that would help me develop into who I am today. My undergraduate experience at Loyola University Chicago was transformative. I entered college as a cautious young person not wanting to make any mistakes. However, I grew into a confident adult willing to take risks and find my voice. More specifically, three college events and experiences were pivotal for my personal growth. First, my semester abroad in Rome got me out of my comfort zone. In Rome, I had to learn to think on my feet and adjust to living in another country and learning a foreign language. Second, I served one year as a Resident Assistant in a residence

hall which helped connect me to the campus community and it taught me the importance of serving the community and students. Third, I became politically and civically active by voting and serving the needs of the local community. I chart part of this political and civic engagement from observing the rise of then-Senator Barack Obama and hearing his call for a more involved citizenry when he came to campus to speak to the student body in 2005.

I later returned to Northwestern as a master's student in education and social policy. I instantly became interested in topics such as first-generation students and standardized tests, study abroad participation, and civic engagement. Years later, I found myself in a PhD program at New York University that examined the longitudinal civic outcomes of study abroad participants and whether they differed by first-generation status. Today, I continue this line of research and serve as the Associate Editor for the *Journal of First-Generation Student Success*, a William & Mary faculty member on the First-Generation/Limited Income Standing Committee, and a speaker to international audiences on how to support first-generation college students.

## **OVERCOMING CHALLENGES**

Navigating the U.S. system as a child who primarily spoke a language other than English presented one of the earliest challenges on the road to higher education. Although born in the U.S., I attended what was referred to as an English as a Second Language (ESL) program to build my English skills. My parents were encouraged to speak more English at home, which negatively impacted my Serbian proficiency. Specifically, reading was tough for me. I preferred math, which was “easier” for me to comprehend without language. My parents offered limited support with math homework but virtually none with other subjects.

While much of the scholarly literature focuses on deficits and what first-generation college students lack, my experiences speak to the assets we bring as well as the support systems that help us achieve. While my parents could not help me with homework, they encouraged me to stay after school, ask teachers questions, and even bought me a computer program to help me when I struggled with my geometry homework. They sacrificed the ability to visit family in Serbia so that I stayed engaged with school and sports throughout the year. Tara Yosso (2005) called this “familial capital” as part of her community cultural wealth model, which I use in my teaching and research today.

My teachers also promoted a college-going culture at school. In eighth grade, as part of career development activities, we had to complete a resume for a job

years later in our desired field. True to my *Star Trek* fandom, I produced a resume to be an astronomer, listing a master's degree in Astronomy. My teachers spoke about what was necessary to go to college and beyond. Not only did they normalize the experience, but they actively encouraged it. Seeing these ambitions, they encouraged me to push forward, take advanced classes, and seek out opportunities in high school to prepare me for the challenges that lay ahead. Today, we use the term "hidden curriculum" to refer to the parts of our educational system that are not explicitly taught to students. I was fortunate that I had stellar guides to help me navigate the process.

## **IMPACT**

I reflect on how these experiences have transformed me from somebody who did not know what a first-generation college student was when I was on the cusp of college to someone who has dedicated their career to the service of first-generation students. As a teacher, I view my students as individuals with infinite possibilities. Each student comes from a unique background. Thus, my teaching has been shaped by the need to know who my students are and what they bring to my class. Like my teachers who met me where I was, I do the same with my students to understand not only what knowledge they bring to the class but also what their hopes and insecurities are. By doing so, I am better able to calibrate their educational experience to meet their needs, whether these needs are academic, career, or personal. I recently had the honor to chair a dissertation by a student, a member of the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota who wanted their dissertation to address their community's concerns of low college attainment. While our two experiences are not the same, I was able to rely on my first-hand experiences as a first-generation college student to help the student conceptualize a dissertation that centered on culturally relevant pedagogy to meet the needs of a largely first-generation student population at a local tribal college. They developed an asset-based framework that featured many of the wraparound services noted in the literature to support students and make the "hidden curriculum" more explicit.

As a scholar, I continue to produce scholarship which focuses on international education and civic outcomes for first-generation college students. Many parts of the democratic world are experiencing a regression in democratic values. My mission is to tell the story of the civic mission of higher education through empirical study. Given that students are the first in their family to attend college, they are rightly evaluating and considering the economic benefits of attending college. From my perspective the economic and democratic benefits go together. My responsibility is not only to produce scholars but also to build the next

generation of scholars. As such, I see my role as an Associate Editor for the only journal dedicated to first-generation student success to help authors, many of whom are first-generation students and faculty themselves, through a publishing process that resembles much of the “hidden curriculum” we see in our schools and universities. Through professional organizations such as the Association for the Study of Higher Education, I hope to elevate the voices of first-generation and racially minoritized members of our field, especially in terms of preparing future faculty for the realities of an academy that is still coming to terms with new and radical forms of scholarship.

## **CONCLUSION**

My journey is certainly not unique. Approximately half of U.S. college students are first-generation students and more first-generation scholars are entering higher education today. I call on all scholars, first-generation or not, to consider these stories, as they work with students with diverse backgrounds to address issues of racial justice and equity in higher education. I would not be who or where I am without the struggles and successes of being a first-generation college student. It is something that I would not trade for anything and am grateful to my parents, teachers, and mentors along the way who made this journey possible.

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## **BIO**

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## Chapter Two

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# Charting Courses and Piloting Paths

## Learning to Succeed in the Journey of Learning

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### **Abstract**

This chapter chronicles the shared journey of three siblings who, as first-generation college students, discovered the transformative power of learning, resilience, and community. We examine the foundational experiences that ignited our passion for learning. As we reflect on our academic paths, we realize that our enthusiasm for learning propelled us throughout our years of schooling. Despite challenges such as navigating school and the college application process as first-generation university students, we ultimately discovered our formulas for succeeding in learning. Likewise, our first internships helped us establish our understanding of the professional environment. Throughout this journey, we

discovered the criticality of maintaining flexibility and adaptability, being open to learning new concepts, and identifying resources beyond high school and college. To express our gratitude for the support of our friends, family, teachers, mentors, and community, we seek to give back to the world.

**Keywords:**

first-generation college students, sibling experiences, educational resilience, learning and adaptability, community support

**Personal Narrative**

At the heart of our journey is how, from an early age, we three siblings were eager to grow our minds and explore the boundaries of knowledge. Our father and mother worked long hours in a small business. They were there weekends and evenings, rarely taking a break while engaged in the daunting workload. Our parents would work from day to night to help customers, plan, and implement new ideas. Despite disruptive challenges such as never-ending highway construction hindering access to the establishment, monstrous hurricanes devastating the region, and more, they exemplified hard work and dedication. We would often join them at the small business, sitting at tables with piles of homework and books to read.

Despite all of their commitments, our father and mother ensured that we forged time and memories as a family together. They took us to playgrounds at parks, on bicycle rides around the neighborhood, saw animals at the zoo, visited local attractions, and much more. Our parents also emphasized education and cultivated a passion for learning. Oftentimes, they would attend school events such as parties, award ceremonies, or simply have lunch with us in the cafeteria.

Even before we started school, we were keen about reading. Several times a month, our parents would take us to the area libraries, where we browsed both nonfiction and fiction titles. As we progressed through school, our interests continued to develop. We accumulated thousands of points in the Accelerated Reading (AR) program, which is designed to foster a love of literature and has been adopted at campuses across the United States. AR points can be accumulated through content-derived tests and then redeemed for prizes. These ranged from pens to shirts to the highest reward: our names painted onto massive stars displayed on the library's ceiling. Ultimately, all three of us were named AR champions and Texas Bluebonnet Readers, which signified that we read an annual list of recommended books. In addition to reading, we tackled higher-level

mathematical workbooks oriented toward students in several grades above us. Completing math enrichment exercises demonstrated that we could succeed even when challenged with rigorous material. We nurtured our curiosity for science, frequently diving into encyclopedias or books on a broad range of themes or communicating STEM topics to the classroom on presentations with *The Nathan Tat Show*. Similarly, we were highly interested in history, as it is filled with the insights of those who helped mold humanity into its present course. We researched historic landmarks and sites during trips, aced unannounced pop quizzes testing our knowledge of various eras in American history, and participated in the History Fair. We were involved in numerous extracurriculars, such as the National Honor Society, University Interscholastic League (UIL) Academics, piano, and more. Thus, our polymathic involvement in various activities was vital to our early academic success.

### **Challenges and Overcoming Adversity**

Throughout our journeys, we faced multiple adversities. Our greatest challenges were related to the novelty of the secondary and postsecondary school environments. Throughout our primary schooling, we succeeded in our academic endeavors as straight-A and perfect attendance students engaged in various enrichment activities. However, we were unsure of what the atmosphere in high school and beyond was like. As the prospect of high school loomed, various gossip and opinions spread about. For example, we heard rumors that the maximum number of advanced courses we could take in total was capped at three, that competition in sports was mandatory, and that school would devolve into a dull morass of endless droning. It was a whirlwind of uncertainty.

However, as we embarked on the journey of high school, we realized that reality often differed from rumors. We learned that it was possible to succeed scholastically while still enjoying time with friends and peers. Further academic challenges enriched our lives, and we were always eager to enter the classroom and explore new subjects. We enrolled in numerous advanced courses, maintaining and even exceeding our expectations. For example, despite being freshmen, we enrolled in upper-level mathematics courses designed for students several grades ahead of us. We eventually passed so many Advanced Placement (AP) exams that we were designated AP Scholars with Distinction and National AP Scholars, the top awards for pupils who had completed college-level AP exams. We also stayed fit by exercising at the recreation center, which offered a break from the mental gymnastics we engaged in.

Our friends and teachers were at the heart of an incredible experience. High school had its routines with rushing to classrooms during passing periods, listening to lectures, and preparing for thousands of tests and quizzes. However, there were also memorable moments beyond the mundane. Highlights such as concocting humorous stories about the legendary powers of our brilliant World History teacher, sprinting to Biology or Spanish class, generating ideas to save the planet through Environmental Science, and enjoying a post-Calculus hangout and Calculus Beach Day were some illustrations of how school could also be fun, even with a rigorous schedule. Our friends and us bonded together by attending study groups and playing chess in the library, tasting fresh-baked cookies and snacks, pondering “Questions of the Day” in Physics, brainstorming ideas for ceiling tile decorations, playing at Senior Field Day and more.

Meeting students from various school districts was also a joy. It was always thrilling to encounter other pupils and compare experiences at interscholastic events such as Link Crew, Academic Octathlon, or HOSA-Future Health Professionals’ state and international conferences. During these events, we often took some time to explore and compare the layout of their schools. Furthermore, we enjoyed guiding new or visiting students around our school facilities when they wandered our campuses. Glimpsing our full-face portrait for National Merit recognition posted at the walls of the school entrance always amused visitors on these visits. Through these photographs, we inspired others to press forward and achieve National Merit status as well.

By senior year of high school, the novel application processes for college mystified us. Applying for a university and major seemed daunting, and entering campuses full of strangers contrasted with high school, where we would see familiar faces every day. Gradually, we learned more about the college admissions journey. At Barnes & Noble bookstores, our family found books discussing the college experience. Embarking on our first college tours, we were pleasantly surprised that the guides were genuinely delighted about their experiences. We discovered we needed recommendation letters, which our supportive teachers and counselors graciously wrote. We trekked through the endless questions on the application portals, edited numerous essays and personal statements as deadlines ticked closer, and finally pressed the submission buttons to finalize our applications. For months, we waited for nerve-wracking decisions. Eventually, each of us received an ambiguous email title in the evening. Gripped with suspense, we opened it, unsure of its contents. To our delight, it stated that we had been accepted into our top choice of school!

While progressing in our journey, we learned that internships were essential to building professional credentials. However, we were unfamiliar with most industries in general and had heard about the difficulties of securing internships. In addition, one of the paradoxes is that applicants need prior experience to accumulate more experience. Thus, although the internship process was challenging, it was vital to understanding the environment beyond the typical school life.

Over several summers, we participated in STEM Camps and the Biomedical Careers Academy at the oldest medical school in Texas, The University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB). It is located on a tropical island. Our parents sacrificed hours of their day, driving us to and from the beautiful campus with palm trees, rose gardens, and sea birds. There, we engaged in scientific enrichment activities spearheaded by the tireless program director, staff, and counselors. Lessons were themed around certain topics, and we followed up with experiments and related activities in allocated laboratory spaces along with snacks and cookies. During the STEM Camps, the program director brought up the summer research program at UTMB and encouraged us to apply. It was a competitive process. Students applied from across the nation, attracted by the opportunity to gain valuable experience in a research environment. Subsequently, the prestigious internship attracted numerous applicants with impressive credentials for a handful of spots. The lengthy application was full of questions about our academics and extracurriculars, leadership skills, and goals; it also required recommendation letters and personal statements. Eventually, we received phone calls and learned we had been selected!

Despite our excitement, we were nervous because most of our schooling focused on academic classwork. Over the course of the internship, we spent each day in biomedical laboratories, experiencing research and science first-hand under the generous mentorship of distinguished scientists and researchers. We were the youngest students on campus, yet we felt at home. We read medical and scientific literature, learned from experts in the field, and joined seminars that included free pizza. Our cohorts were filled with accomplished individuals who were curious about science and strove to change the world. We bonded at the recreation center and explored Galveston restaurants and sights such as the downtown Strand District, boat and dolphin tours, antique stores, and the historic Seawall. We even had movie nights and ice cream parties to relax. Upon the internship's conclusion, we presented at a research poster symposium to an audience of faculty, staff, students, friends, family, and the public. After a keynote speech, the program director introduced each of us and gave us certificates. As we posed for photos and celebrated with appetizers, cookies, and fizzy pineapple sodas, we were thrilled

to have been a part of the storied internship. We became the first family to have three siblings in this program! Likewise, through this and other internships, we experienced how the professional world operated.

### **Impact and Transformation**

Our journeys have impacted and transformed us. Some key impacts are highlighted through adaptability and being open to alterations to our paths. Prior to college, we assumed that students could choose from only a limited selection of majors. To our surprise, we discovered that we could pursue various subjects, ranging from the humanities to the social sciences to the natural sciences and engineering. We also found how minors and certificates were offered to broaden our scope of education. For example, public health was not explicitly described in high school, but we realized that it is a critical component for ensuring that our planet thrives; thus, we all became involved in this discipline.

Furthermore, we realized that many students ultimately pursued majors different from what they had initially planned. Having succeeded in AP courses meant that we had extra room in our schedules to pursue minors and certificates, and we found that certain subjects were especially appealing. For example, the Macroeconomics professor at Rice University engaged the class with genuine enthusiasm and compassion for students. Being willing to adapt and pursue different fields of study strengthened us as individuals. Navigating study groups and projects with friends on various topics allowed us to solve problems together while meeting a variety of students in different majors. We decided to enroll in electives to broaden our horizons, ultimately giving us unique perspectives. For example, a course on English and sustainability demonstrated how multidisciplinary perspectives are needed in the environmental sciences. We participated in health and physical education classes by engaging in wellness conditioning or by playing team sports. This reminded us how essential it was to exercise.

We also learned how to identify and leverage resources beyond the classroom. Higher education is a novel experience, and most students find themselves overwhelmed by expectations and drastic differences in this environment. We found that engaging with academic and career counselors was a crucial component of college. Our academic advisors were keen on helping with guidance, such as designing course loads, identifying useful links between our curriculum and goals, and understanding how to navigate the class registration platforms. Similarly, the career counselors were exceptional and were ready to assist students anytime in navigating the professional world. We learned about

how to navigate online sites for succeeding in college or finding internships, as a vast array of internet resources has facilitated a greater understanding of career options. For example, we found that online job applications for internships are daunting; however, having them centralized on platforms has facilitated the process. The directors and staff of our graduate programs were always ready to offer encouragement and advice as well.

Eventually, we discovered how impactful it is to participate in workshops and conferences. Conferences enable attendees to meet others and become exposed to new ideas and suggestions. They offer opportunities to deepen communication skills via presentations to audiences and interactions with other visitors. In addition, conferences encouraged us to venture beyond silos, allowing for innovative ideas to spread. With the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learned about the power of online platforms. Meetings both in-person and online have been crucial. Virtual events allowed us to engage and share ideas with others unconstrained by geographic boundaries and travel. Thus, interacting and being a part of conferences has been beneficial for personal and professional growth.

Finally, we learned about the importance of acknowledging and celebrating each other's successes. Oftentimes, we make many sacrifices and put forth a lot of effort to climb towards our goals. Once we reach the summit, taking a step back and reflecting on the journey allows us to contemplate the adventure. For instance, we would wrap up each of our school years with an elegant academic banquet. The event was held in the evening with formal attire, festive decorations, and live music. We commemorated each other's successes, distinctions, and honors onstage, such as the Shining Star Awards for the top students. This motivates us in future challenges, showing us that through hard work and determination, we can reach unprecedented heights.

## **Conclusion**

Eventually, graduations approached for all of us. At the commencement of Rice University, a defining moment is to cross through the Sallyport, marking a milestone in the academic journey. Hearing fireworks explode, decorating personalized graduation caps, and taking pictures with our friends and family highlighted how much we had grown ever since we first started learning the alphabet and numbers. Afterwards, several close friends joined us to celebrate at a local hibachi and teppanyaki restaurant. We also toured our hometown with coffee and boba tea in hand. During the festivities, we reflected on how each of

the steps, challenges, and lessons have imprinted footprints in our avenues. From our very first hours in school to graduation, we have forged paths toward our future. Even though we each walk our own journeys, we are not alone. We are inspired by our parents' efforts and the support of our teachers, mentors, friends, and community.

Even while being curious about new opportunities and avenues of exploration, we seek to give back to society. In addition to other students and members of the UTMB and broader communities, we have established an organization named Taking Our Best Shot (TOBS). The spark for this initiative was ignited when we realized that our community wanted to learn more about health. Thus, TOBS aims to promote public health and STEAM (science, technology, education, arts, and mathematics). TOBS consists of individuals with a variety of training and education, with backgrounds ranging from public health to biochemistry and from cell biology to economics. We also invited speakers from the biomedical sciences, nursing, and medicine. As most of our team is heavily involved in science and health, we hope to benefit our shared world by leading science outreach and promoting public health practices.

As we continue onwards, we are grateful for our paths and for the encouragement of our loved ones, and we are excited for what awaits. The lanterns on the road glow brightly ahead of us, and we can follow their illumination to the wondrous lands of knowledge beyond.

## **BIO**

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## Chapter Three

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# Nachos and Lightbulbs

## Illuminating the First-Gen Journey from Homelessness to Higher Learning

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter chronicles my journey from homelessness to earning a PhD as the first in my family to attend college. It delves into the challenges of navigating poverty, overcoming self-doubt, and finding support while cultivating resilience. Through moments of self-discovery and growth, I explore how education became both a sanctuary and a catalyst for transformation. This narrative reflects the intersections of identity, socioeconomic status, and higher education, highlighting the power of mentorship, community, and self-advocacy. Rather than merely motivating others to overcome their circumstances, I share my story to inspire readers to reflect on their journeys and discover the liberating power of self-awareness and resilience.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation college student, homelessness and education, resilience and self-discovery, socioeconomic barriers, mentorship and transformation

## INTRODUCTION

My journey—from a childhood fractured by sudden poverty to a life spent empowering others through education—is a saga of resilience, resourcefulness, and opportunity’s transformative power. This chapter traces my earliest memories of privilege—a stable home, familial warmth, and small luxuries—to the unraveling of that security as financial instability thrust my family into years of transience, hunger, and shame. My story is not just one of overcoming adversity but of redefining success, where hardship becomes a bridge to building a life of purpose rather than a barrier.

## PRIVILEGE TO POVERTY

My earliest memories are of a relatively privileged life. I remember a home filled with friends, family, laughter, and good food. We even had HBO, a luxury in the early 1980s. My parents took my brother and me shopping for new clothes before school started, we ate out often, and we each had our own room in the house.

However, things began to change when I was around seven years old. My parents started arguing more, and the lively gatherings at our house became less frequent. HBO disappeared, though I didn’t mind much; it mostly showed the same movies on repeat. Soon after, we stopped going out to eat as often, but that felt manageable because my mother was an excellent cook.

Then, the changes became more significant. We lost access to gas in our home, so we had to heat water for baths and cook meals on electric skillets. Eventually, the utility company cut off our electricity entirely. We stored food in an ice chest and relied on my mother to bring pots of hot water from friends’ or relatives’ homes so we could bathe. Before long, we started spending nights at the homes of friends and family, in pay-by-the-week motels, or even in our car.

I did not understand it then, but looking back now, I realize that we were homeless. This became our reality for about three years, from when I was nine until I was 12. What I didn’t realize then was how deeply shame clung to me. Even as we laughed together in our car-turned bedroom, I felt the weight of being “less than”. Poverty wasn’t just empty pockets and no place to sleep; it was a constant whisper that we didn’t belong.

Those years were hard to comprehend as a child. School, instead of being a place of refuge, became a source of pain and embarrassment. Kids can be

cruel. My brother and I shared all our clothes, and each had only one pair of shoes. We couldn't afford haircuts or hygiene products consistently, so we often looked—and smelled—like the homeless children we were.

Without electricity, doing homework after sunset was impossible. Without proper nutrition, concentrating in class felt like a losing battle. Despite all these challenges, I pushed myself to go to school every day for one reason: food. School provided breakfast and lunch, and that alone was enough to make me endure the teasing, the discomfort, and the struggles.

### **WILL WORK FOR FOOD**

We eventually settled into my grandparents' home, although they were also struggling financially. My grandfather had recently returned from a federal prison sentence for drug trafficking, and we often went without food or electricity. Seven of us lived in a small two-bedroom, one-bathroom house with no steady source of income. However, this new location placed us just eight minutes away from a local restaurant—a place that would become pivotal in shaping my life.

At that time, my cousin worked as a dishwasher and prep cook. One Friday evening, just after 5 p.m., he came to my grandmother's house to speak with my older brother, who was 14 years old. My cousin explained that one of the other dishwashers had called out sick, and he needed someone to cover for the night. He told my brother he'd earn \$20. After a brief discussion, my brother agreed and went to work.

Around midnight, my brother returned home. Since the four of us shared a room, his return woke me up. I heard my mother asking him about his night. My brother was soaked, dirty, and visibly tired, but he was holding a \$20 bill and a white Styrofoam box. I was drawn to the box, as the most incredible smell was coming from it. My brother explained that he'd eaten at work and saved food for us. He handed the box to my mom before heading to take a bath.

When my mother opened the box, I was awestruck. Inside were nachos topped with beans, ground meat, cheese, lettuce, sour cream, and guacamole. Seeing my expression, my mom offered the food to me. I ate every bite, and it was the most delicious meal I'd ever had. Even now, more than 30 years later, I still go to that restaurant, order those nachos, and feel transported back to that moment.

Two weeks later, my cousin came back to my grandmother's house. My cousin needed help again, but my mother explained that my brother was not home. Overhearing this, I blurted out that I wanted to go instead. I was only 12, so my

cousin and mother were hesitant, but I was determined. I wanted those nachos. My mother asked if I would be safe, and my cousin assured her I would. Seeing how adamant I was, my mom reluctantly agreed.

That night, I went to work. I completed every task without hesitation, went above and beyond what was asked, and made a great impression. Throughout the shift, I ate leftover food from mistakes or returns, and I remember feeling wet, dirty, and exhausted—but none of it mattered. I had never eaten so much in one night. My performance earned me more opportunities to work when others didn't show up, and eventually, the restaurant hired me permanently.

My enthusiasm and work ethic never wavered. The restaurant paid me, and I ate regularly. This experience instilled in me a deep sense of the value of hard work. Within six months, the manager promoted me to prep cook, and less than a year later, I became a line cook. With a steady income, I started contributing to household expenses. When my parents separated, my mother, brother, and I moved into an apartment. My mom paid the rent, and I covered the utilities. At just 15 years old, I became an adult overnight, my childhood traded for utility bills and grocery lists.

By 16, I worked six days a week, often over 50 hours, while still attending high school. Despite my income, all my money went toward necessities for my family. Watching my peers who worked enjoy luxuries I could not afford, I eventually turned to illegal activities to satisfy my wants. I started shoplifting name-brand clothes, selling drugs, and even stealing cars.

My criminal activities ended abruptly when a friend, arrested for a separate crime, implicated me in exchange for a lenient deal. The police arrested me, and I spent 10 days in a juvenile facility. At the time, I thought being poor was the hardest thing I'd ever endured, but losing my freedom taught me an even greater lesson. Not being able to choose when I slept, ate, or showered made me realize that, even in poverty, freedom is invaluable.

They released me from the facility in August, and I joined my high school football team the very next day. Football gave me a sense of purpose—it kept me attending class and motivated me to maintain the grades needed to stay eligible to play. That experience became yet another turning point, steering me toward a brighter future.

## BACK TO SCHOOL

Being on the team and enjoying the sport motivated me to follow the rules. The basic requirements—maintaining good attendance and grades—were designed to keep students eligible to play. What impacted me the most during this time was a budding friendship and friendly rivalry with one of the most gifted students at our school.

When I attended school and applied myself, I performed well academically. This placed me in advanced classes where I was surrounded by others on similar academic tracks. One standout peer was the class president, a starter on the football and basketball teams, and an all-state award winner in theater and prose competitions. We became friends and pushed each other to improve. While he excelled at preparation and following a plan, I relied on my ability to think on my feet, charm others, and adapt quickly. Our different approaches challenged and inspired us both.

Like many other schools, ours aimed to introduce students to college opportunities. After one presentation, my friend asked me where I planned to attend college. I answered honestly: “I’m not going to college. People like me don’t go to college. I’m going to work in a kitchen my whole life and make my way.” At the time, I truly believed that college was only for people who were White, wealthy, or athletes—none of which described me. My friend scoffed at my response, insisting I was wrong, although the conversation did not go much further. Nevertheless, his words planted a seed of possibility and made me wonder: *What if he’s right? What if I can go to college?*

Whether it was the excitement of new possibilities or my desire to continue our friendly competition, I took steps toward college. I took the PSAT and other practice exams, researched schools, attended college visits organized by the school, and eventually took the SAT and submitted applications. I applied to two schools, and both universities accepted me. Even then, I doubted that college was in my future because of the costs. However, when I received a financial aid package that showed that I could afford it, even with loans, I realized I was out of excuses.

## OFF TO COLLEGE

When I left for college, I was nervous and scared. I did not believe I was “college material” and was determined not to fail. Stories of people from my hometown who had gone to college only to drop out after a semester or a year haunted me. Whether it was pride or sheer stubbornness, I resolved to do everything possible to succeed. My first year, I never missed a class. I completed assignments early and

took full advantage of campus resources. I did not participate much in campus activities beyond intramural sports and hung out with people in my dorm. The sacrifices paid off—I finished my first semester with a 3.75 GPA and my second semester with a 3.5 GPA. While academic success boosted my confidence, two nonacademic experiences involving people from my dorm shifted my perspective on college and my place in it.

The group of guys I befriended in my dorm seemed to embody everything I thought it meant to be a “college student.” These guys came from families with college-educated parents and professional careers. My roommate’s mother was a college professor, and his father was an engineer. Our neighbor across the hall had a father who was a dentist and a mother who was a military officer. Other friends had parents who were school administrators or executives. They knew how college worked and things I had no clue about, such as semester hours, registration timetables, and the role of a provost—all foreign concepts to me.

Despite the differences in our backgrounds, making friends was easy. We bonded over sports, video games, and shared dorm life. One of our weekly rituals was grocery shopping together. Some of my friends had never thought about groceries and budgets before. I still carried the experience of poverty and the memory of going without meals. I approached grocery shopping focused on staples such as rice, beans, eggs, bread, and tortillas. My friends, who were on generous allowances from their families, filled their carts with organic soda water, fresh deli meats, name-brand cereal, and precut fruits and vegetables that barely lasted a few days.

By mid-semester, however, many of their allowances were either drastically reduced or cut off entirely. On weekends, when the cafeteria had limited hours, my room became the go-to hangout spot—mainly because I always had food, and they were often hungry. For the first time, I felt like the one with something to teach.

Around this same time, another incident left a lasting impression. My roommate, a 21-year-old junior and electrical engineering major, asked our neighbor across the hall a question that caught me off guard. As I climbed the stairs to our room, I overheard him say, “Our lightbulb went out, and we have a replacement, but the new one is 90 watts, and the old one was 60 watts. Does it matter if I put the 90-watt bulb in?”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I asked, "Have you truly never changed a lightbulb before?" He admitted that he hadn't. I laughed and said, "You're an electrical engineering major, and you've never changed a lightbulb?"

His response, "We learn about circuits and theories, not practical application."

That moment, combined with the grocery-shopping dynamics, changed my perception of my peers. I realized they weren't "better" than me or more advanced—they simply had different life experiences. Their circumstances had exposed them to certain opportunities, while mine had taught me entirely different skills. At the time, I did not have the words to articulate this realization, but looking back, I see that I had been undervaluing my own knowledge and overvaluing theirs.

From that point on, I approached college with newfound confidence. I engaged more actively with my campus community, connecting with students, faculty, and staff, which made my time at college more enjoyable. That confidence, however, had a downside. I put less effort into my coursework, adopting an "I'll figure it out" attitude that was reflected in my grades. Nevertheless, I persevered and became the first in my family to earn a college degree.

## **CONCLUSION**

After graduating, I began working at a community college, creating and managing a scholarship program for first-generation college students. That experience inspired me to return to school for a master's degree. As a graduate student, I became more disciplined and engaged. During that time, I met the woman who would become my wife, and after graduation, I moved with her as she pursued her doctorate.

While working at the same institution, I also began my doctoral studies. My dissertation focused on first-generation Latinos and their motivation to pursue higher education, and I earned my PhD in the Fall of 2017.

After I earned my PhD, I became the founding staff member of a first-generation scholarship program and support office. My personal and academic journey has equipped me to mentor students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Each student I mentor brings a unique story, and when their experiences mirror my own—of hunger, shame, or doubt—I can offer them proof that survival is just the start. Supporting first-generation college students remains a passion, as I strive to invest in future generations seeking a better life, just as I once did.

**BIO**

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## Chapter Four

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# It Takes a Village

## A Working-Class Journey to Cancer Research

Friederike Johanna Schnaack

### **Abstract**

This chapter traces the inspiring journey of a working-class girl from rural Germany who rose to become a cancer biologist at a leading university hospital in New York City. From a childhood touched by loss and family separation, she found strength through the unwavering support of family, teachers, and mentors. The narrative reflects on the challenges of navigating academic life without prior exposure to scientific systems, managing imposter syndrome, and coping with mental health struggles during her PhD journey. Ultimately, this is a story of resilience, self-discovery, and the power of staying true to one's values while forging a path in science.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation scientist, working-class background, academic classism, resilience in STEM, mental health in PhD journey

## **Introduction**

When comparing myself to others throughout my school and college years, I was always drawn to the numbers—numeric measurements of success—which can be inferred from the classes taken and the grades achieved. I was a top-level student, and learning new things still comes naturally to me to this day. I was disappointed when I did not obtain the best grade or if I was not selected for a stipend or award that I applied for. I thought it was my fault that I was not good enough and probably would not have the chance to ever receive a stipend or award.

I first realized the ongoing classism that still exists in the academic system when I did not receive a stipend from a foundation that I later learned was known to have a bias toward students from academic families. This was a turning point when I learned that failure does not automatically imply a lack of intellect or suitability for my field of study. Instead, it can reflect the nepotism and elitism many people encounter in the scientific system. This is my story, and my approach to overcoming this bias.

## **Personal Narrative**

I very much like the African idiom, “It takes a village to raise a child,” and I believe it is more relevant in working-class families than in upper-class families in the developed world. In working-class families, mothers—and still, it is much more the mothers than parents in general in heteronormative settings—need the support of their family and friends to both provide for a living and ensure a good upbringing for their children, as opposed to being able to invest (which could certainly be seen as an investment, both in the parents’ careers and the future of the children) in daycare and education.

My upbringing was no exception. My mother got pregnant with my sister when she was just 20 years old (two years older than my grandmother was when she gave birth to my mother, living a very classic housewife life). With my sister’s father absent after divorcing the marriage my mother never wanted to be in, she worked full time while my grandmother took care of my sister. You can imagine the difficulties that arose in terms of parenting style, but also the dependency on the support needed. There was no daycare for toddlers back then in Germany, and even when I was born 10 years later, this was not the case (this is only an improvement in recent years in Germany and is certainly not yet available in all rural areas).

Therefore, my mom decided to stay home for the first three years of my life, which has until today resulted in decreasing her pension payments—not to mention the financial insecurity she had from pausing her job for that long while being the primary provider for the family.

I had a wonderful childhood until second grade. I never felt anything was missing in my family. My mom knew how to handle money very well, and we were able to go on vacation. The amount of presents under the Christmas tree was just insane. I felt safe, cared for, and nurtured, and from a very young age, my mom made sure I would be well educated: I was taking English classes when I entered kindergarten (with my mom starting part-time work), I learned to play instruments, and I participated in various sports courses.

This was all possible because my mom realized that it would be a valuable investment in my future (imagine me writing this essay in a foreign language without having been taught English at such a young age—I benefited a lot!). She believed it was worth making sacrifices to help me develop my talents. All of this was only possible because she increased her workload again, which meant that she needed someone to look after me. From primary school onward, I spent most days at my grandparents' house after school. There was no bus infrastructure to get me places—my grandfather, grandmother, uncle, and sister had to drive me where I needed to go.

During these times, I was a bright student, curious, eager to learn, and I excelled. My parents even considered having me skip classes in elementary school, but socially, I wasn't as mature as I was intellectually, so I stayed with my peers. I continued to demonstrate excellence even when two major events occurred that defined my life and character.

First, my grandfather died when I was 8 years old. It was very sudden; it all happened very quickly, and after a few weeks in the hospital, he passed away. I was devastated. He was my idol. The cancer had probably been there for a while but he did not tell anyone.

This loss had a profound impact on my life. Perhaps I wouldn't be doing the job I do right now if my grandfather hadn't died from cancer. It is an enormous motivator for me to pursue a career in cancer research to help people avoid the suffering and loss I feel. By trying to find novel targeted therapies for solid tumors, I want to improve patient's outcomes and quality of life and enable them to spend more time with their beloved ones. It's also my way of repaying the privilege of having received the education I did.

The second major event was the separation of my parents—a divorce battle, alimony suit, the whole ordeal. I had to make a statement in court. I was 9 years old. I had my notes with me, what I was going to say, and I delivered that lecture in front of the judge. That might sound a bit sad, which it certainly was at the time.

That was that. Of course, this changed our financial situation significantly, with my father not paying proper alimony. This was the first time I noticed struggling with money, especially when things such as expensive class commutes came up later in high school. There were social funds at school designed to support single parents, but my mom was too proud to apply for them until I insisted, assuring her that I did not care if anyone knew we applied.

Money was a topic of shame. It took me years to grow out of that mindset, which I did not encounter with my friends and peers from well-off families. I always believed that my family was upper middle class until while pursuing my studies, I looked up the statistics. I realized that I was actually only just above the poverty threshold.

I moved on with my high school diploma—being sent to a ‘gymnasium,’ meaning I was pursuing a university-entrance degree. Nobody in my family had ever attended a gymnasium. Born and raised in working-class families, where my great-grandparents on both sides had to migrate after World War II—meaning no long standing family property or wealth—both of my parents started making a living early, dropping out of school or even had to support their whole family with their jobs.

I had very supportive teachers during that time—female role models for me that I could look up to, with academic backgrounds and standing that I wasn’t familiar with at home. They encouraged me to write poetry, to try for awards, to enroll in science competitions—I did all of that, and they supported me not only with words but also by actually going places to see me perform and give talks. Again, to make that point—this type of support—people giving me their precious, precious time and encouragement, made an enormous difference for me. I aim to pay it back once I mentor students of my own.

I left my hometown to pursue my studies in biotechnology in far-away Berlin. I had planned to study close by, living at home to make it more affordable, but love had different plans for me, and I followed my former boyfriend to the capital city. My parents could not afford to financially support me any further, but that was alright for me. I had had side jobs all the time since I was 14 years old—giving

private lessons, helping out in a store, or working as a social media assistant. It was absolutely out of the question for me not to work while pursuing my studies.

What I learned was that while this was very normal for my working-class peers, it was not the case for the majority of students from academic backgrounds. Some of them never worked, or only started working during their Master's—more for work experience and networking than for making a living. I was baffled when one time a professor told me that students were not supposed to work while studying, which is why he would not allow courses to be structured differently in terms of timing. He believed that one should have parents pay for one's studies or take a student loan.

I still think a lot about this conversation, which opened my eyes to how academics can be absolutely ignorant about the privileged life they are living. I got lucky because I was allowed to work overtime so I could still attend the course and by that time I had secured a stipend (lesson learned: be persistent, it'll work out). Many of my working-class peers had to make the difficult decision to either quit their jobs (which was mostly not possible if you wanted to pay your rent and groceries) or skip the class. You can imagine that most of them needed to keep their jobs and, as a result, could not take the class.

My first intellectual struggles arose when I stepped out of the classroom and into the lab, running my own projects for my bachelor's, master's, and PhD theses—things did not work out on the first try, and I had to deal with a level of frustration I had never experienced before in my academic journey. I had never learned that failing is okay. For me, failure was tied to loss, to fear—just like when my dad's companies kept failing, and he slipped into personal insolvency. I was horrified of failing. I did not want to disappoint anyone, and I wanted safety in my life.

It took me years to understand that I could grow from these failures—not only as a person but also as a scientist. Being persistent, being creative in finding workarounds, adopting an analytical approach to find solutions where none existed before, and having the courage to sit still while the place is on fire—because it will work out. Somehow. In the end, it always did.

It wasn't until the end of my PhD that I internalized this. Wanting to live up to (perceived) expectations others had of me wasn't helping my mental well-being during a time I was struggling with my relationship (well, scientists have personal lives too—dealing with that while having a competitive job can be exhausting). I went into a medium-heavy depression. I worked on it with a

therapist, which truly changed my perception of myself, made me more aware of my boundaries, and allowed me to actually live up to my values—independent of others' expectations or validation.

I have built a professional network of peers who share my values, both in academia and beyond. I began to live my personal values in my everyday job life as well. I was once worried about how others perceived me, but I no longer am. If they complain about me being authentically me, then this is not the right place for me. Of course, holding a PhD and not being dependent on superiors helps. Since the day of my thesis defense, I have only felt that my power and confidence are growing, enabling me to navigate academia.

I think if a professor ever told me again how my parents should be in charge of paying for my studies or how I should navigate my professional life, I would tell them to get off their high horse—or finally come down from their ivory tower. If not, I'll have to go upstairs and tear this tower apart.

I recently moved to New York City to start my first postdoctoral position. While there was a lot of self-doubt and imposter syndrome during my PhD, I am progressing toward becoming an independent scientist. Not to say, there are no doubts at all—it can be helpful to have the humility to question yourself sometimes, especially in science.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I want to emphasize once again that I only made it to where I am now through the support of various people. They identified my skills and passions, nurtured me, trained me, mentored me, encouraged me, and comforted me. While this was mainly my family during my early years, it was my high school teachers, inspiring and kind professors, and scientific and personal mentors who supported me along my educational and personal path later on. They dedicated their time, money, energy, and passion to help me become the person I am today—and allowed me to discover who that person actually is.

I have a very dear memory of my dad putting me to bed when I was very little. This routine may have nourished my curiosity in the first place. When it was time to go to sleep, I was allowed to ask three questions. No matter what, he would answer and explain.

Well, what can I say? I know a lot about dinosaurs now.

## Chapter Five

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# Displaced, but not Defeated

## Achieving the Doctorate as a First-Gen Student

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter explores the experience of navigating my doctoral journey as a first-generation displaced doctoral student. It can be easy to assume that once a first-generation college student earns their first degree, their academic journey becomes more manageable when they pursue advanced degrees. But the scholarly personal narrative below disrupts that assumption while considering the nuances of other intersectional identities that have been historically marginalized. In this chapter, I share the technical aspects of pursuing a doctoral degree and its social and cultural factors.

**Keywords:** first-generation doctoral student, academic displacement, intersectional identity, doctoral journey, scholarly personal narrative

## INTRODUCTION

Being a first-generation college graduate is an academic accomplishment and my ancestors' sigh of relief. My ancestors lived in a world that told them that being educated would make them a threat. They lived in a world without being allowed to read or write. They fought through bigotry and anti-Blackness and eventually sent me here to continue their work for our community. This chapter explores the intersectional nuances of Blackness and scholarliness, sheds light on doctoral student retention issues, and presents a personal narrative of support networks for first-generation college students.

## PERSONAL NARRATIVE

College was a place where I always knew I could go, and at the same time, it was a place where I did not think I could make a difference or better understand my purpose in this life. When I decided to attend college, it was not until my second week of school that someone referred to me as a first-generation college student, or first-gen for short. While the term first-gen has multiple definitions academically, socially, and culturally, it was a title that I did not take lightly. I come from a Creole cultural background, where most of my family is from Louisiana. Not much of my family's history was taught to me, but I could trace my family line back to 1800, starting with my great-great-great-great-grandparents, Joe and Maria Bowman. After an additional search, I discovered that from 1800--2014, no one had obtained a college degree before me. This unfortunate truth is accompanied by the fact that Black people in the United States were not allowed to attend college until the 1820s (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 2010), Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) didn't exist until 1837 (Thurgood Marshall College Fund, n.d.), and even in light of having legal "access," there were multiple barriers that deterred Black people from attending college, some of which extend to the present day. On May 10th, 2014, at 10 am, at Northern Arizona University, I brought my first college degree back home to my family. It was not just my degree or a diploma with fancy words. It was also a warm embrace; it was pain disappearing; it was the last tear my ancestors shed before they took their last exhaled breath; it was confirmation for my ancestors to fulfill their final duty: to rest in peace. When I earned my first degree in 2014, I earned my second degree in 2016 from Lewis & Clark College and became a two-time first-generation college graduate! The first two degrees were tough, but nothing compares to what I experienced when pursuing my last degree.

## THE FINAL DEGREE

I started my doctoral program on October 31, 2017, where I was pursuing a degree in Professional Leadership, Inquiry, and Transformation at Concordia University-Portland. My cohort was 13 people strong, and we got close quickly, which was bittersweet. I say this because, after the first year of coursework, my cohort went from 13 to 3 people remaining. As a scholar-practitioner in higher education, most of my work focused on undergraduate student retention. However, this experience broadened my mindset and encouraged me to learn more about retention rates among graduate and doctoral students. That is when I learned that most residential doctoral programs have reported attrition rates of up to 50% and nearly 50- 70% for online doctoral programs (Rigler, Bowlin, Sweat, Watts, & Throne, 2017). My two remaining cohort members and I stayed connected, checked on each other more often, and shared words of affirmation, memes, and jokes to help one another get through the day. We maintained our motivation to get through the second year of coursework, and by the end of 2019, we completed all our coursework and were ready to take on the research stage of our program.

Unfortunately, within the first quarter of 2020, we learned that Concordia University-Portland planned to close due to financial issues; my cohort mates and I had to transfer to a different university, and the world shut down due to COVID-19. For 45 days, instead of working on dissertation proposals, IRB applications, and continuing to bond with my cohort mates, I had to coordinate meetings with colleges and universities across the country to interview me while witnessing how many loved ones were dying around me due to the spread of COVID-19. At this point, I was referred to by a different title: displaced student. After taking the time to determine where to transfer, I decided to transfer to Northcentral University (NCU), where I pursued a doctoral degree in Organizational Leadership.

After a few days, I checked in with my cohort mates and told them about my decision to transfer to NCU. They were both excited for me, and yet, at the same time, I could tell that there was something they wanted to tell me. My cohort mates, Marie and Carol, decided to tell me that they were no longer going to continue with their doctoral studies. After hearing the news, I found myself experiencing a range of emotions, including shock, sadness, and happiness. I was shocked to know that this meant I was the only person remaining from my cohort, sad because I did not want to “lose” them during this journey, and happy because they took the time to be honest with themselves and make a decision that was right for them. As time progressed, I powered through my

research requirements. As the world was still navigating loss, fear, and confusion due to COVID-19, I continued pushing through. Through the several virtual hangouts, happy hours, birthdays, weddings, and funerals I attended, I never lost my motivation to get my doctoral work done. On November 24, 2020, I defended my dissertation and was referred to as a doctor for the first time.

Receiving this recognition was different because all the glitz and glamour were absent. I was not getting suited and booted and ready for the day. I was not going to a physical location to share my research with my friends, family, and colleagues, who would later celebrate me. Instead, I was sitting at my dining room table, with a polo and pajamas on, talking to three people on a Zoom call with a wifi connection hanging on for dear life. My dissertation committee gave me my final congratulations, the call ended, and I wept in silence alone in my apartment. Within the first 20 minutes of being Dr. Wright, I experienced sadness, guilt, frustration, anger, relief, and happiness all at once.

It was not until two years later that I celebrated this accomplishment live and in person during a graduation ceremony. I told everyone I intended to walk across a stage and hear my name called one last time; I didn't care whose stage it was. I knew that being a first-gen doctoral student would have its challenges; however, being a first-gen displaced doctoral student during a pandemic is not something I had marked on my bingo card. While the circumstances were not ideal, I still managed to find collateral beauty through all the sadness and chaos.

I would not have earned this accomplishment without a strong support network. When Concordia closed, several mentors, mentees, colleagues, and faculty extended their love and grace to me. They knew I had been working hard and were willing to do all they could to ensure that my journey did not end with no degree. These people advocated for me by contacting colleagues at their institutions to see if I could transfer and finish my coursework. They also wrote letters of recommendation, provided financial assistance, sent me scholarship and grant applications, prayed for me, and empowered me not to give up through their shared advice. Through the continued support of my community, I was able to persevere and achieve my final degree.

## **CONCLUSION**

The first-generation identity does not go away once a first-generation student earns a degree, nor does it go away once they have earned multiple degrees. This identity follows them throughout their lifetime, whether in the classroom or the boardroom. It is imperative to recognize the nuances of first-generation

narratives and appreciate the differences they all have. Doing so creates an opportunity to reimagine how colleges and universities can better serve and support first-generation students on their campuses.

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## BIO

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# Becoming a Scholar Across Borders

## A First-Generation Immigrant's Transformative Learning Journey

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter narrates the transformative academic journey of a first-generation immigrant woman navigating the intersections of language, culture, motherhood, and higher education in Canada. As an English language learner and researcher in mathematics education, the author reflects on the challenges and opportunities encountered while pursuing advanced study, engaging in research, and teaching in a new cultural context. Through resilience, community support, and professional growth, she has developed a strong scholarly identity and a deep commitment to fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion. By sharing her personal experiences, the author seeks to empower others—particularly multilingual and immigrant scholars—to persist in their academic pursuits and thrive in cross-cultural educational environments.

### **Keywords**

first-generation scholar, immigrant academic, English language learner, transformative learning, mathematics education, equity and inclusion

## **INTRODUCTION**

I grew up in a small Chinese village where my parents never had the opportunity for higher education. I carried the family's hopes and honor, pursuing higher education and achieving a good position in my career. I was the pride of my family. Ten years ago, I gave up everything in China and immigrated to Canada to join my husband. To continue my career as a MATH teacher educator and researcher, I decided to join a PhD program at a major Canadian university. This changed my life dramatically.

## **PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

The new learning environment posed unexpected challenges for me and my family. In China, I was an experienced scholar in math education, and I was confident that I could complete my PhD program successfully and efficiently. However, things did not unfold as expected. Upon arriving in Canada, I enrolled my three-year-old son in a daycare center in order to have more time to focus on my studies. However, this hasty decision caused him much distress, as he needed time to adapt to the new environment and was still struggling to express himself in English. He began to exhibit behavioral issues, which completely disrupted our plan. We “had to” spend more time with our son after he was expelled from two daycare centers. I slowed my studies and devoted more time to my son. I also started to worry about his future, given the behavioral issues he was displaying. My uncertainty about the school environment only deepened our concerns. Would he be expelled from school if he continued to behave poorly, just like in the daycare centers? Moreover, I found that some of the theoretical courses in education are challenging due to the complex vocabulary and abstract theories. This left me feeling inadequate and unqualified, especially since I had always been confident in my ability to learn.

Later, when I began considering my dissertation's research topic and methodology, I planned to employ hermeneutic inquiry as an interpretive approach to understanding and making meaning of phenomena within their contexts. Initially, I desperately needed to understand precisely what hermeneutics entailed and how to conduct such a study. However, hermeneutics is not a method with a prescribed set of procedures. I doubted my ability to approach it correctly. This struggle stemmed from my previous academic experiences, which focused on finding the right answers and performing well on tests, particularly in my mathematics major. This uncertainty plagued me for a considerable time.

I graduated from my PhD program during the COVID-19 pandemic. At that time, I desperately hoped to secure an academic position to fulfill my family's hopes and provide them with the security of knowing that I had a stable job again. However, this seemed impossible at that time. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to teach undergraduate courses online. As an English language learner, I have always preferred face-to-face communication over online interactions or phone calls. These online teaching opportunities caused me to question my communication ability. Could I clearly convey my ideas and effectively understand my students' ideas? I wished to speak perfect English and converse with students as easily as a native speaker. Even though I realized that achieving native-like fluency was unrealistic, these thoughts impacted my self-confidence as an educator.

### **CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING ADVERSITY**

Challenges arose from parenting, my academic studies, research, and my teaching. These challenges were compounded by adapting to a new environment, navigating language barriers as English language learners, unfamiliarity with local school culture, and a lack of confidence in one's abilities. Fortunately, the support I received enabled me to continue my learning journey and overcome these obstacles.

When working closely with my son's teachers, I learned that he received individualized support at school. For example, his kindergarten teacher, Mrs. B, used his interests to help him develop his ability to manage routines. At the time, Colin was fascinated by the periodic table and space. Mrs. B gathered related materials from high school and encouraged him to present updated scientific research on the elements and space, nurturing his interests. This support, which was used as a reward for following routines, helped him settle well into school. Colin is now in Grade 9, and I no longer worry about his future. He has the full potential to become a scientist, as he dreams of becoming.

In my own studies, several courses specifically invited us to reflect on our learning experiences. This offered me the opportunity to examine my own struggles and share my experiences with peers. Additionally, I had the chance to listen to others' experiences. My peers—both native and nonnative speakers—shared their challenges in understanding the complex vocabulary or theories involved in the courses. This exchange helped me realize that I was not alone in my struggles and that sharing our experiences could provide mutual support. This insight has since become an integral part of my current teaching approach.

To overcome the uncertainty of conducting hermeneutic studies for my dissertation, I engaged in a small-scale inquiry. I adopted a hermeneutic perspective as part of a course with my supervisor, Dr. Simmt. This experience gave me valuable insight into developing an understanding through active participation. The exploratory process itself was integral to hermeneutics. Ultimately, upon completing my dissertation, I freed myself from preconceived notions of what was “right” and became more open to the emergent possibilities of my work.

My struggles and difficulties helped me better understand the challenges my students face in my teaching. Although learning mathematics came easily to me, I initially lacked a deep understanding of the difficulties students might encounter in their own mathematics learning. Many of my students had very negative experiences with mathematics. However, my strength in mathematics has enabled me to help students grow in this subject, even though I do not speak “perfect” English. In each course, I am pleasantly surprised by my students’ growth, which exceeds my expectations, and I also learn a lot from them. This enriches my future teaching.

## **IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION**

My journey was one of learning and growing. Self-discovery was integral to this process. First, I began to embrace and appreciate my Chinese background, particularly in my teaching. My Chinese background was initially perceived as a limitation due to language and cultural barriers. However, in my teaching, I observed many students struggling with mathematics because of the way of teaching mathematics. This led me to investigate the role of language and culture in mathematics learning. Miller et al. (1995) argued that English presents obstacles to children’s understanding of mathematics, such as number representation, citing a comparison of English and Chinese speakers’ counting abilities, which favor Chinese children. Miller and Stigler (1987) further reported that Chinese children more readily form proper number names, whereas English number names hinder children’s number learning. For instance, in Chinese, the number 12 is expressed as “ten” (shi) and “two” (er), clearly reflecting its base-10 place value structure: one ten and two ones. This expression literally helps students understand the meaning of 12. In contrast, the English word “twelve” does not explicitly convey this meaning, making it harder for students to grasp.

In addition, I discovered the deeper meaning behind my teaching and research. Before moving to Canada, I viewed myself as an experienced scholar, with extensive research, publications, and a tenured academic position. However,

much of my work has been driven by the demands of career advancement and my ambition to be a reputable scholar within the field of math education. The struggles I faced during my own studies and my son's schooling prompted me to reflect on the purpose of my teaching and research and how I could contribute to the next generation. When working with preservice mathematics teachers, I began to question how I could make my teaching and research meaningful to myself, to my students' future, and to the schooling of the new generation. Simply meeting job requirements is no longer sufficient. I shared my own learning struggles with my students to show that they are not alone and that everyone faces different challenges. These struggles, as they were for me, can become valuable assets in their future teaching. I also shared my growth as a parent, highlighting my work with my son and expressing gratitude for the individualized support that his teachers provided. This support not only allowed him to have a "normal" school experience but also fostered hope for a promising future—perhaps as a scientist. This experience led me to reflect on the qualities of effective teachers: not only pedagogical knowledge but also genuine love for children and a commitment to meeting their diverse needs. Therefore, my teaching is not only about imparting knowledge but also about fostering their affection for mathematics and for children while embracing their unique experiences and cultural backgrounds. I don't allow any of my students to suffer or doubt themselves as I once did in my own learning.

Last but not least, I now consider myself a true scholar. My work and contributions are not defined by a job title. Over the past four years, I have worked in various roles as an instructor and postdoctoral fellow, teaching preservice mathematics teachers and facilitating professional development for educators in engineering and other disciplines. My work has gone beyond fulfilling job responsibilities; I aim to make a broader impact, influencing not only those directly involved but also the wider community. I have shared my experiences with students and colleagues at my university, and I strive to integrate my learning and teaching experiences into my presentations and publications to reach a wider audience. This includes individuals who, like me, may be first-generation college graduates, adult immigrants with young children, English language learners, those facing educational challenges, and those lacking confidence or experience in teaching and research.

## **CONCLUSION**

My learning journey, enriched by my experiences in learning, research, and teaching. It empowered me to become a true scholar. Through this journey, I discovered the deeper meaning behind my teaching and research. My struggles

and difficulties have been transformed into valuable assets, shaping my path as a genuine scholar navigating a new land—both physically and culturally. Sharing my experiences reflects my commitment to fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion in my own classroom, as well as in the school classroom for children, while empowering others. By reaching out to those with similar backgrounds, I hope that my sharing inspires and encourages them to pursue their goals despite the challenges they may face.

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## BIO

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# From Linares to Leadership

## Embracing My Mexican–American Identity

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores how a rich bicultural heritage and strong familial influences shaped my personal and professional identity. Raised in Mexico by my mother and her extended family, I developed a deep connection to my Mexican roots while sustaining meaningful ties with my American father. Central to this narrative is the profound impact of my grandfather—a respected educator—whose legacy of humility, integrity, and service guided my journey into higher education leadership. Through reflective vignettes, I examine the formative role of family, culture, and education in cultivating values of empathy, justice, and equity. This narrative affirms the power of honoring one’s heritage while using lived experience to lead with authenticity and purpose.

### **Keywords:**

Mexican–American identity, multicultural upbringing, educational leadership, family legacy, cultural heritage and values

Culture and heritage have always been of great importance to me and come from two families that are very different and opposite from each other, which has made my identity self-discovery an intertwining, and sometimes difficult, journey. Gloria Anzaldua (1987) once wrote that “living on borders and margins keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identities and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element.” This quote describes to perfection the feeling of that “in between,” that mix of where my heart and my heritage knowledge lay. Never fully feel like part of either but always identify with one more than the other. My mother was born and raised with a Mexican father and an American/Mexican/Native American descendant mother. As for my father, he is from the northeast of the United States and has German and French heritage. I always joke with my friends and peers about how DNAwise I am half & half... Yes, like the milk, but culturally, I identify more with my Mexican heritage since I was raised in Mexico with my mom and her family. My parents divorced when I was very young, and my father stayed in the U.S., so I would see him only on vacation time from school (approximately two to three times per year). He would call me on the phone almost every day, so I got to practice my English since infancy, but never had the level of English needed for college (who knew I would end up going to college in the U.S.). I tell you all of this because even though I spent most of my formative years with my mom in Mexico, it is important to see how each member of my close family had an influence on who I am today no matter where they were from. They influenced me as a person, as a professional, as a student, as a mother, as a wife, and even as a leader. I am a mixture of not only heritage and culture but also higher education influences. My father finished a bachelor’s degree from Texas A&M, whereas my mother did not have the opportunity to go to college. My grandfather on my mother’s side grew up in a small village outside of Montemorelos, N.L. in Northeast Mexico, and he was resilient in his pursuit of becoming a teacher. To him, education was the basis for everything. He loved his profession, and to this day, at almost 90 years old, he still embodies it every day. Thanks to his example, I became the first woman in my family to have not only a bachelor’s degree but also a master’s degree and halfway through a doctoral degree.

While in Mexico, I spent most of my time at my grandparent’s house (my mother’s parents). I am an only child and the oldest of 11 grandkids, so my grandparents, as you can imagine, were like my second parents. My grandfather would pick me up from school every day, take me to their house for lunch, and then take me home in the evening to get ready for bed to go to school the next day. Home was my great-grandmother’s house, where she, my mom and I lived

for most of my childhood. However, when Friday came, I was the happiest girl alive because I would get to stay at my grandparents all weekend long. I can still remember watching cartoons on Saturday early morning, eating Trix (my favorite cereal, which my grandfather would always have on hand). In addition, as I watched Tom & Jerry, Coraje el Perro Cobarde (Cowardly Dog), or Las Chicas Superpoderosas (Power Puff Girls) on Cartoon Network, I would eventually hear my grandmother in the kitchen making noise with pots and pans while she started cooking breakfast. As I smelled the homemade salsa and huevos volteados (sunny side-up eggs) and the hot dry air would start seeping through the open windows of the house, I would lay on the mosaic floor to try and stay cool. My grandparents were of much influence on me in different ways. My grandmother taught me to be clean and organized and how to properly iron a dress, a shirt, and that dress pants should have an ironed line in the front. My grandfather was a retired teacher/principal at that point, but was still very passionate about his profession; he was known in our town as being an exemplary teacher in every way.

During his final years as a teacher, he brought a middle school from the ground up, literally and figuratively. After helping the school be built and even planting trees for the outdoor spaces with his own hands, he went on to be the founder of the school and was its first principal. Escuela Secundaria No. 2 Rodrigo Gomez is still there today after many generations of graduates and with its original motto written by my grandfather and some of his peers: “Estudia para Aprender, y Aprende Para Servir” (“Study to Learn, and Learn to Then, Serve”). I still remember reciting it every morning, as we did our morning flag honors standing in rows on the school’s outdoor cement basketball court. His photograph still hangs in the principal’s office today, and I know this because I can still remember one time when I was in my second year at that school (8<sup>th</sup> grade), I was approximately 14 years old, and I got in trouble and ended up in the principal’s office. The principal at the time used to be a teacher who worked for my grandfather in the past, and for the first time ever, I saw my grandfather’s giant photo and his eyes staring at me, making me feel so ashamed. How could I!?, the granddaughter of the man who had this perfect reputation and was so looked up to for his work and ethics at this institution, be in trouble at school. Most of my teachers at the time had worked with my grandfather when he was the principal and were still there, they knew who I was, so my shame was even worse. You see, the town where all of this happened was small at the time, Linares in the state of Nuevo Leon in northeast Mexico. This little city, about four hours south from the U.S.-Mexico border, was my home... still is even though it is not as safe to go back to because of issues beyond anyone’s control which I will not get into here. I do miss my hometown, with its rich history and traditions. I miss

the smell of warm baked pan dulce in the mornings as you walk by the main plaza and la Catedral (the cathedral) as it rings its bell for morning mass. I miss the smell of the Azares, the flower that grows on orange trees in the late summer evenings and I could smell as we drove home from my grandparents' house with the car windows rolled down. I miss it because it is what I call home, and it reminds me of a simpler time, but I also am glad I had the fortune to expand my horizons and live many of my dreams. In the end, I think that that makes me appreciate my hometown even more.

One of the greatest challenges I faced in my higher education journey was being a single mother when I started college. I went through a divorce and had a four-month-old baby when I started my bachelor's degree as a freshman at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV). Without my mother and stepfather's help caring for my son during my long on-campus days, I would not have been able to attend college at all, so I owe so much to them as well as my dad for helping me economically during that trying time. However, my mother was still concerned and wanted me to be a K-12 teacher, so I could have the same schedule as my son whenever he went to school later in his life, but I was not in love with my major, and I started feeling miserable. Eventually, I changed my major to Anthropology, which made more sense for me since I was always intrigued by museums, history, archaeology and different cultures. My mom had not experienced what college was about. In her mind, K-12 was the only major that made sense, and that would give me a stable job because that is what she saw in my grandfather all her life. Even though my grandfather instilled the love of education and serving others in me, my vocation was not destined for K-12 education but for higher education, which I fell in love with while being a college student. Eventually, my mom came around to the idea that I could build a career with an anthropology major and trusted the process, but it took a long time for her to see that I could actually be a provider for my son while not being a K-12 teacher. I was fortunate enough to meet amazing professors at the UTRGV Anthropology Department, and without them, it would have been very hard for me to finish my degree and go on to finish a master's degree. It was thanks to one of my professors, Dr. Margaret Dorsey, that I was able to start working part-time almost immediately after I graduated. Once I started working at the Border Studies Archive (BSA) at the UTRGV Special Collections department, something just clicked for me. I realized that education, in some shape or form, was indeed what I had been preparing for all my life. I had done an internship at the Mission Historical Museum once, and I fell in-love with archiving and museum studies, but being able to work in a museum or archive within a higher education setting was like putting all the dots together and finding my calling. At

the BSA, I conducted interviews with local people who talked about culture and their life in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). I got to learn about the importance of collecting and preserving those stories for future generations to hear and learn from and the power that preserving culture has, so we never allow it to be lost. In addition, then I knew it, I knew that that was what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. However, it was an epiphany that did not come to me on my own, it was thanks to my parents' support of my dreams, my professors at the UTRGV Anthropology department in pushing me to achieve those dreams to the point of letting me bring my son to class (he has an honorary master's degree), and my two best friends and former BSA colleagues, Rocio Diaz, and Dr. Lupe Flores, who stood by me in some of the hardest times of my life. My achievements are their achievements, because it truly "takes a village," and my dreams have become a reality because of all of them.

Going back to my grandfather, I always admired how humble my grandfather always was and still is about his career. He saw his accomplishments as a service to others and nothing more. To this day, he never takes credit for doing anything alone and always gives credit to the peers he had along the way. His way of life, and the love he has for education and service, is what taught me that serving others is the greatest accomplishment we can have in life, and I truly believe that that is why I love my job so much and why I find joy in it every day. He always told me it was an act of love to educate, and it went beyond what was taught in the classroom. He also showed me what it was to lead with integrity, honesty, justice, equity and empathy, and I strive to live up to his example and that he is as proud of me as I am of him. From my parents, I learned that no matter what stands in your way, when you have a dream and the will to achieve it, you will achieve it with hard work. I was fortunate enough to have my parents' support through it all, but it has been their love and encouragement to live the life I wanted that gave me the strength to get through it and to keep soaring. From my mom I learned that family is the best thing we have in life, and that they are the ones who always support us when in need. That the people who love you, are your family even when they are not related by blood, but that it is their support that shows their true love for you just like her and my step-dad did for me and my son all of those years going through college and beyond. From my dad I learned that when you have a dream, you "don't take no for an answer" as he has told me so many times. His dream was to become a pilot, and by having that set of mind, he achieved it, and installed that same determination in me. From my mentors and professors at UTRGV, I learned the art of selfless love for academia, and the honor it is to give back to your community through research and involvement. Finally, from my two best friends and former colleagues, Rocio Diaz and Dr. Lupe Flores, I learned that

true friendship does exist, and even though we come from different backgrounds, different religions, different sets of minds, it is the love, respect, and embracing who we are that makes friendships strong and is what life is all about. From my grandfather giving me the foundations of the fire I have in me for education and servingness to all the mentors, family, friends, and supporters I met along the way, I am here because of you, and you are proof that love for one another, regardless of where we come from, goes a long way... Therefore, thank you.

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**BIO**

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# Deep Roots, New Heights

## Examining the Resilience and Adaptation of First-Generation Americans

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter explores the resilience and determination of first-generation Americans as they navigate complex cultural academic and social landscapes. Through personal narrative, this chapter also examines the challenges of cultural identity formation, belonging, and systemic barriers in higher education. It underscores the importance of support systems such as mentorship, community building initiatives, and culturally responsive resources. Institutional limitations that impact educational experiences are analyzed focusing on how both first-generation and international students often face cultural dissonance, cultural disconnects, and a pervasive lack of institutional recognition of their distinct needs. This work attempts to inspire broader conversations on educational equality and institutional transformation, and the value of a more just and integrative educational environment where all students can thrive.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation Americans, cultural identity, higher education, resilience, mentorship, community building, institutional barriers

## **INTRODUCTION**

My identity as a first-generation Ethiopian American has allowed me to celebrate a rich heritage while also managing the complexities of bridging two cultures. My parents immigrated to the United States from Ethiopia as young adults motivated by a commitment to higher education and the hope of building a strong, supportive future for their family. Despite being fluent in English my parents faced acculturation challenges without the benefit of familial support in a new country. Understanding the challenges they encountered while navigating the US higher education system, such as limited access to culturally attuned advising, both informed and inspired me. Their experiences shaped my commitment to creating environments where all students feel empowered.

This chapter examines the challenges and accomplishments of first-generation students like myself, drawing from personal experiences, observations, and research on the barriers confronted by international graduate students in higher education. This analysis delves into the complex relationship between cultural identity and the sense of belonging. By articulating these experiences, this work underscores the urgent need for support systems beyond the home that can effectively recognize and address these barriers.

In summation, my chapter emphasizes the importance of fostering environments that respect and celebrate the diverse backgrounds of all students. I call on educators, institutional leaders, and administrators to critically reassess and enhance their approaches to supporting first-generation and international students. It is my hope that the insights drawn from my experiences will contribute meaningfully to ongoing efforts toward more inclusive and supportive educational spaces.

### **Reflections on Identity, Belonging, and Education**

My educational journey has been shaped by personal discovery and a deepening understanding of the importance of connection and inclusion. As a first-generation Ethiopian American the theme of belonging resonated as I navigated academic environments. Growing up in a multicultural setting allowed me to embrace two distinct cultures, each providing its own valuable perspectives and experiences. Moving through higher education was particularly interesting. Despite my parents' extensive educational backgrounds, I found the nuances of academia to be an exciting new challenge. I was driven to excel, and the high expectations from my family served as a strong source of motivation. I felt a

profound sense of responsibility to succeed not only for myself but also to honor my family's sacrifices.

While my parents maintained ambitious standards, they also offered unwavering encouragement that nurtured my pursuits and passions. They consistently set aside their own dreams to ensure that I had the opportunity to realize my aspirations. My Christian values were a cornerstone throughout this journey, providing me with hope, strength, and resilience during challenging times. I was also fortunate to have a network of support systems that helped me navigate my journey. Academic advising and involvement in several cultural organizations served as vital resources. Building relationships with fellow students who shared similar backgrounds proved to be a lifeline. This sense of community not only enriched my social life but also provided a platform to share our stories and support one another.

I began my college journey at an institution known for its rich history and dedication to empowering students. My experience was transformative as it provided a supportive community and a reinforced sense of cultural affirmation. This environment allowed me to connect with peers who shared similar backgrounds, fostering a spirit of camaraderie that was invaluable. From the moment I arrived, I felt a strong sense of community. I clearly remember my first orientation where the stories of my fellow students mirrored my own, including tales of family sacrifices, cultural expectations, and the determination to succeed. This sense of belonging was empowering, and it allowed me to feel seen and validated. I realized that my journey was not just mine alone; it was part of a collective narrative celebrating our shared challenges and triumphs.

Transitioning to other institutions later in my academic career exposed me to a new array of challenges. While these institutions provided opportunities and resources, they often lacked a deeper understanding of the specific barriers many encounter. I found myself navigating environments where cultural differences and new norms offered unique pathways for growth and learning. Although cultural contrasts were often evident, they ultimately enriched my perspective. Inspired by these moments, I became actively involved in campus organizations that promoted representation and belonging.

I found purpose in advocating for my peers, championing initiatives that celebrated diverse backgrounds. This engagement not only strengthened my own sense of belonging but also helped others navigate similar challenges. I witnessed how the collective voices of students could bring about meaningful change within the institution. Through these experiences, I came to understand that belonging

is not just about finding a place; it's about creating one. It requires courage to speak up, share our stories, and uplift others along the way. My journey has taught me that true belonging is a dynamic force, evolving with our experiences and growing through connection and advocacy.

These experiences also helped me gain a more refined understanding of the systemic issues that affect first-generation American students. The gaps in support systems became evident, highlighting the need for accessible resources that recognize and address the unique challenges. Over time, I discovered that genuine support extends past academic advising to include guidance, cultural sensitivity, and efforts to nurture a strong sense of community. My experiences at various institutions have shaped my perspective on the importance of inclusive environments. It has also reinforced my commitment to advocating for support systems that empower all students to excel in their educational pursuits.

This dedication to promoting community among students ultimately led me to write my doctoral dissertation on the experiences of international graduate-level students and the importance of creating supportive environments for them. Through my research, I aimed to explore the unique challenges these students face, such as isolation and loneliness, language barriers, and the often-overwhelming transition to a new educational system. I wanted to highlight how crucial it is for institutions to recognize and address these challenges. In my research, I explored the ways in which inclusive practices can significantly impact the academic and personal success of international students. I sought to uncover strategies for creating environments that not only welcome diverse perspectives but also actively engage students in their communities.

My research highlighted the profound impact that intentionally designed institutional services have on first-generation and international students. Programs such as mentorship, which pair new students with experienced peers or faculty sharing similar backgrounds, offer crucial support and clarity in navigating academic and cultural challenges. Multicultural centers go beyond being mere meeting places; they provide spaces where students' cultural identities are embraced and celebrated. Engagement in heritage nights, panel discussions, and student-led cultural events, help many students deepen their sense of belonging and strengthen their connections within the community.

My research further revealed that housing programs like global living communities or themed residence halls designed for students from diverse backgrounds, may serve as avenues for promoting intentional peer engagement and cross-cultural learning. Informal moments, such as meals shared in common

spaces, also play a key role in building trust, encouraging dialogue, and deepening relationships among students. These environments can reduce feelings of isolation and foster collaboration, particularly when supported by resident assistants trained in cultural competence. Mental health services, too, must be accessible and culturally informed, offering counseling that reflects an understanding of diverse values, lived experiences, and stigma related to mental wellness. When institutions invest in these areas, they do more than provide resources; they signal to students that their presence and success are a priority, reinforcing a campus culture of belonging, inclusivity, and mutual respect.

I take pride in my African heritage, and my journey has involved honoring my lineage and contributing to the broader dialogue on equality. Although I was born in America, I can empathize with the experiences of those who have navigated the challenges of immigration. Each personal narrative, including my own, adds an important layer to the diverse framework of first-generation and international experiences, highlighting the determination required to thrive in a world that may often overlook these struggles. Navigating obstacles influenced by diverse cultural backgrounds has deepened my awareness of the struggles many first-generation American and international students experience. Drawing strength from my family's sacrifices, I have learned to meet these challenges with resilience as I forge my own path. I've also learned that resilience is not just about overcoming challenges but also about embracing the full scope of my cultural identity. I recognize that my cultural background is not a barrier but a source of strength that informs my worldview.

As I reflect on my educational path, I recognize and appreciate that every moment whether joyful or challenging has profoundly shaped my personal growth. These experiences have taught me to further embrace my identity and advocate for welcoming spaces that empower all students to flourish. As a professor, this journey has reinforced my conviction that fostering a sense of belonging is essential to the educational experience, and it has strengthened my commitment to ensuring that all students feel respected and acknowledged as they pursue their own paths. This work has been both a personal and academic endeavor as I aim to add to the dialogue about belonging and support in higher education. I am passionate about advocating for systemic changes that uplift all students, ensuring that every voice is considered and upheld in the pursuit of knowledge and growth.

The understanding I developed through navigating these complexities has greatly influenced my life personally and professionally. My experiences have inspired me to pursue a purposeful path focused on cultivating cultural

responsiveness in educational settings. By sharing my journey, I highlight the importance of identifying and tackling the challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds. This affirms the need for educational institutions to create supportive environments that not only acknowledge cultural differences but also celebrate them. My story is part of a larger narrative advocating for systemic change where every student can prosper.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, while the key points of my chapter highlight experiences that stem from a unique cultural perspective, they reflect broader struggles shared by many students from diverse backgrounds as they navigate their educational paths. These challenges demonstrate the importance of cultivating environments that honor and celebrate the individuality of all students.

My journey has reinforced my commitment to creating educational spaces where every student feels supported. By recognizing and uplifting the diverse narratives and experiences that exist within our educational systems we not only enrich the academic environment but also lay the groundwork for a more inclusive society. Establishing spaces where all students feel accepted requires dedicated resources, a genuine commitment to fostering an atmosphere of belonging, and intentional policies. Effectively addressing these challenges requires proactive engagement and a deliberate commitment to developing and implementing transformative solutions for first-generation American and international students. These initiatives are essential to ensuring that higher education functions as a pathway to empowerment and success.

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## **BIO**

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# Proving it Forward

## Complexities of Equity-Minded Leadership in Higher Education

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter examines the journey and multifaceted challenges of transitioning from a first-generation college student to an equity-minded professional in higher education. It highlights the intentional trajectory and decision-making process that led to pursuing a career in a helping profession. Through personal narrative and critical analysis, the author examines the sometimes double-edged nature of supporting minority students as leaders in higher education. The chapter highlights parallels between the author's educational and professional experiences, illustrating how past experiences underpin the core values that shape professional practice, leadership, and equity work in the field. The chapter also addresses the pervasiveness of a racialized workplace, cultural taxation, imposter syndrome, and compassion fatigue in higher education work. Collectively, these nuanced experiences shed light on the complexities of equity work and highlight both the weight and the wonder that come with being a trailblazer and advocate.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation college students, equity-minded leadership, higher education, minority student support, racialized workplace, cultural taxation, imposter syndrome

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a small town with just one stoplight, there is only a limited extent to which one's household, community, and school system could offer a college-going culture. For many first-generation college students from small towns, such as me, sometimes the main postgraduate options presented before you are as follows: 1) blue-collar work, 2) farming, and 3) the military. Growing up with parents who worked in factories made it even more clear that the experiences I longed for were embedded within the grounds of a university. While my parents could not guide me through college navigation, they wanted much more for their children. They constantly reminded us of our brilliance, our capacity to enact impactful work, and that, no matter what, our blackness was not a form of deficit. They frequently encouraged us to go as far as we could in life to "be their eyes" in the world they weren't privileged enough to see.

This chapter examines the complex journey of transitioning from a first-generation minority student into the ranks of postsecondary leadership. Through my experiences as both a first-generation student and now a higher education professional, I often employ a retrospective approach to my work, leaning on previous experiences to guide how I serve students. The intersection of personal experience and professional practice reveals a delicate balance between being both a trailblazer and an advocate. I understand firsthand the challenges students face while navigating the complexities of creating institutional change from within. These intersecting identities and experiences shape not only how I approach student support but also how I challenge systemic barriers that continue to impact marginalized students' access to and success in higher education. As one of few minority leaders in higher education and within my immediate sphere of influence, I have learned that equity-minded leadership can bring as much if not more pain than it does joy.

## **FROM PAIN TO PURPOSE**

My understanding of educational equity began as early as my first year of college. I could almost physically feel the gaps in my college preparation level compared with many of my peers. I constantly found myself decoding the jargon of higher education and being puzzled by the idea of appealing a grade. As a first-generation student, I didn't know that I would have so much autonomy to figure things out and solve my own problems. During my undergraduate years, I experienced a lot. The pivotal moment came when I fell on academic probation and got suspended from the university. I had to navigate institutional policies and departmental procedures to be reinstated as a student while not having any familial guidance.

To be honest, I was too ashamed to tell them, and how would they have known what to do to begin with?

After changing my academic major, I began to thrive. Through my studies in interpersonal and organizational communication, I chose to pursue my true interests. I stopped struggling to become a medical doctor just because family and community members insisted that's what you do at a "fancy school." I taught myself how to learn and discovered the true value of tutoring and academic support. As I progressed through my academic journey, I gained academic confidence. I knew then that I wanted to help people who faced similar disadvantages. These experiences sparked my interest in a profession dedicated to helping students. This interest later evolved into pursuing higher education administration.

Looking back on my transition from student to professional, I realize that inequality was alive and well. What became increasingly clear was that although the institutional playing field may be level from a legal point of view, there were still many systematic barriers and societal challenges that were pervasive in the college-going experience for minority students. In my own experience as a college student, I had to face the crossroads of identity negotiation and determine how I wanted or needed to show up in the spaces I occupied. Some of this contemplation came from parts of my identity being thrown in my face. I experienced racism at my university for the first time. I felt uneasy and powerless to control it. Before then, racism existed only in movies for me. I also couldn't afford spring break trips. I ate inexpensive foods and relied on a campus job to get by. Simply put, I was poor.

These reflective moments intensified my awareness of being Black and strengthened my pride in my upbringing. This experience laid the foundation for my equity-minded practice as a higher education professional and leader. Tapping into Black history helped me understand the legacy of resilience, activism, and excellence that preceded me. I gained purpose knowing that my presence in these spaces was hard-fought by generations before me. My success could pave the way for those coming after.

Growing up as a poor kid and country boy instilled in me that I can always make a way for what I need. I had cultivated grit, hunger, and drive that was incomparable for many of my peers. These lived experiences, from navigating institutional barriers to embracing my identity, have shaped my commitment to creating more equitable and humanizing spaces in higher education, where

students from all backgrounds can thrive without having to compromise who they are.

### **THE HIDDEN LABOR OF THE EQUITY WORK**

Working within historically white institutions presents many challenges. This is especially true when prevailing values, practices, and policies were created without considering historically underrepresented groups. These institutional behaviors become incubators of racialization. They adversely impact the needs of Black, Brown, and other minoritized people who work and study there. From my perspective, these groups clearly need support systems. The playing field is not as level as society claims it is in higher education.

I am the type of professional who will feed students if they are hungry, give them a ride if they have to walk a mile in the rain, or even give them a few dollars to make sure they can have materials for class. Too often, I have students open up about all the responsibilities they have to balance their family dynamic back home, and/or their personal challenges. Students across different institutions have told me the same thing: that they finally found someone who gets it, someone who will actually do something when they need help. Many of them harbor the stress that comes along with it or take on isolation strategies, so if they find enough trust in me to share, I act.

Cultural taxation, or the additional burdens placed on minoritized professionals their formal job duties, manifests in various ways. This phenomenon involves providing different forms of care exhaustingly, granting students access to emotional, financial, psychological, social, and temporal resources. I have become the go-to person for students who need extra support. It started small, but words travel fast when students find someone they can trust. Now I'm juggling dozens of unofficial mentees on top of my regular duties. The days get longer and longer as more students come my way through word of mouth. I cannot say no when a student needs help—that is not who I am. However, one person cannot keep carrying all this hidden work forever. The institution needs to step up.

The complexity of supporting minority students becomes evident when doing such work backfires. These actions, although intended for the greater good, have been described as "inappropriate" or as demonstrating favoritism to certain students. I have found myself overexplaining or having to justify why I am going above and beyond for students who need that level of care. Perhaps most challenging is having to maintain composure because I'm the only one who sees the problem. As one of few minority leaders, navigating these workplace

dynamics means observing a blatant racialization that is not evident in the eyes of one's nonminority peers.

The weight of representation extends beyond individual support. In navigating these spaces, I have found myself thrust into equity-related work, whether I wanted it or not. I have become the translator between administration and minority student needs. Students' wariness of the institution is not surprising when you look closer: these spaces were not built with them in mind, and many of our practices still reflect that reality. The number of students needing support continues to grow, but only one person can do this while maintaining the quality of care each student deserves.

### **COMMUNITY VALUES IN INSTITUTIONAL SPACES**

These experiences have shaped my leadership approach by constantly reminding me that basic human care should be at the forefront of student support. At the core of my professional philosophy lies the lessons on "real" support that my small-town background etched into my being. We take care of our neighbors and the people within our community when they have hit a rough patch. The humanistic approach I adopted stems from this deep-rooted understanding that community care is not just about programs and policies; it is about showing up for people when they need them. This truth, which is fundamental from my perspective, often fails to be understood in many higher education spaces. On that same coin, I have to learn how to maintain community values in spaces that prioritize professional boundaries, even when those boundaries may be arbitrarily defined.

There is no doubt that a heavy weight comes with holding a leadership role. It comes with the imposter syndrome of being a trailblazer. I am constantly in disbelief at how far I have come and the rooms I've been able to enter, with a looming fear that I'll at some point be "determined" as fraud. It comes with a survivor's guilt complex. A hard truth to endure is knowing that I have made it, and others will be left behind. As I continue to climb a ladder to success, I face unshakable pressure to succeed for more than just myself because my home community and my students see their own possibilities in it. However, I have learned to transform this weight into purpose, allowing it to ignite my commitment as well as direct my approach to creating impact in the postsecondary setting.

The double-edged nature of being both advocate and trailblazer means leading with humanity in spaces that were designed to standardize rather than humanize.

My commitment to equity work is reflected in the understanding that I may not be able to change systems, but I can influence the cultures that exist within them. I have learned to often be comfortable doing the uncomfortable. I may have to be abrasive about student needs or interject in situations where students are not being seen as whole people. This type of leadership requires persistence and patience, with dedication to being an angelic disruptor. In the end, creating change means being willing to stand firm in your values while teaching others to see humanity in our work.

## **CONCLUSION**

The journey from minority first-generation students to equity-minded leaders illustrates that although much has changed in higher education over the years, so much remains the same. To be frank, I am tired. The passion to work in the field does not hit the same as it did when I first started, and that is not fair. The complexities of supporting minority students while navigating institutional structures promote compassion fatigue. This exhaustion stems not only from the work itself but also from fighting against systems that claim progress while maintaining the status quo.

The path forward requires higher education to move beyond casting illusions of inclusion through buzzwords and catchphrases. Instead of making aimless claims to meet students where they are, institutions must learn to recognize and build upon students' cultural wealth to create educational environments with them rather than for them. This shift demands not just recognizing but also actively dismantling barriers to create systemic change.

Graduate programs in educational leadership must embrace robust internship experiences that expose future professionals to the realities of equity work. This emphasis on experiential learning is particularly crucial for those pursuing careers in student services administration, where authentic connections with diverse student populations are essential. My transformation from struggling first-generation student to equity-minded leader occurred through lived experience, not classroom theory. Future leaders need experiential learning opportunities that allow them to develop authentic relationships with diverse students and practice the uncomfortable work of advocacy within institutional constraints. Through structured field experiences, they can learn to recognize signs of student distress, understand cultural taxation, and develop skills to distribute this emotional labor across broader networks of prepared professionals. Only through such preparation can we develop leaders ready to share the burden

of cultural taxation and create sustainable change rather than perpetuating cycles of individual sacrifice.

Through this journey, I have become the witness and champion that my younger self yearned for, and my hope for future generations of minority leaders is that they can break the cycles we have been fighting. I want them to know that being present is their superpower. Their very existence in these spaces is a form of resistance and change. There is an institutional responsibility to distribute the weight of equity work across all levels of leadership rather than relying on the isolated efforts and personal sacrifice of minority leaders. For this work to matter, it must be sustainable, not merely convenient.

## **BIO**

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## Chapter Ten

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# A Journey to Self-Discovery

## Self-Determination for Success as a First-Generation Student

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### **Abstract**

The success of first-generation students, particularly those studying abroad, is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by cultural adaptation, academic challenges, and self-determination. I share and explore the journey of a first-generation doctoral student, emphasizing the interplay of mentorship, spirituality, and psychological resilience in overcoming both systemic and personal barriers. This reflection offers insights into transformative moments, highlighting the roles of mentorship, spirituality, and self-resilience in contributing to a new self-identity and, consequently, academic achievement.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation students, studying abroad, cultural adaptation, mentorship, spirituality, psychological resilience, academic achievement

*“He who has a why to live can bear almost any how.”*  
Friedrich Nietzsche

## **Introduction**

The journey of first-generation students studying abroad involves a complex interaction of cultural adaptation, systemic barriers, and personal resilience. This narrative reflects my experiences as a first-generation doctoral student navigating challenges and milestones in pursuit of academic success. By situating my story within broader systemic trends, this chapter highlights the transformative role of spirituality and self-determination while advocating for mentorship that supports marginalized students.

Born in a small town in the Middle East, I grew up in a community marked by socioeconomic struggles and a rich farming heritage. In this context, education was neither prioritized nor widely accessible, and upward mobility felt unattainable. Despite their limited formal education, my parents initially instilled in me the value of learning as a pathway to transformation. This narrative recounts my journey from humble beginnings to pursuing a doctorate in social psychology in Canada, highlighting the crucial roles of mentorship, spiritual connection, and self-determination.

In my hometown, higher education is rare. Most of my peers followed conventional paths—manual labor, small businesses, or skilled trades—while academic aspirations were often dismissed, especially for males. The stigma surrounding education in the community was tangible, and my pursuits were frequently ridiculed. This social environment fostered a deep sense of imposter syndrome. During my journey, I continuously suppressed the belief that my achievements were either luck or temporary. However, any minor fault of a mine was taken as a tool for others to reinforce this feeling, either in academia or the community.

## **Milestones and turning points**

Despite these challenges, key milestones shaped my academic route. Acceptance into a competitive high school marked the first significant turning point. With the guidance of dedicated teachers with similar backgrounds, I began building the confidence needed to envision a future in academia. Subsequently, gaining admission to a top university in my home country, followed by my decision to pursue higher education abroad—beginning with a master’s program in Malaysia—opened new horizons through a connection with a retired psychology professor, with whom I maintained regular contact via email. Although the

cultural shift was daunting, it fostered resilience and adaptability. My subsequent move to Canada for doctoral studies presented not only further challenges but also opportunities for profound growth and self-discovery.

### **Challenges and Overcoming Adversity**

Pursuing a doctorate is inherently challenging, but personal, social, and academic adversities further complicated my journey. Before starting my PhD, I faced the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, my mother's diagnosis of gastric epithelial dysplasia, and the heartbreaking loss of my only best friend. Despite these difficulties, I persevered and relocated to Canada to begin my studies.

However, the challenges only deepened as my PhD journey progressed. Early on, I faced the complexities of changing my initial supervisor, which brought its own set of uncertainties. This was followed by a fraudulent marriage that soon led to spousal betrayal, thievery, legal frameup, a challenging divorce, and persistent financial instability.

Toward the end of my program, I encountered a significant obstacle when my study permit renewal was delayed. This situation now raises concerns, potentially jeopardizing my ability to defend my dissertation. Additionally, it resulted in revoking my driver's license, lifting my work permit, and canceling my health insurance. These compounded adversities exhausted me emotionally and financially, pushing my resilience and determination to their limits. Despite receiving multiple suggestions to return to my home country, this was not a viable option for me due to personal challenges, along with the instability of internet access and frequent power outages.

Socially, adapting to a Western academic environment meant facing cultural misunderstandings, microaggressions, and feelings of isolation. As an international student with a low-prestige background, I often felt ignored and underestimated. Academically, balancing rigorous research demands with financial instability requires unwavering determination.

My mentor's advice and self-determination played vital roles in navigating these challenges. Mentors provided academic guidance, helping me regain my balance during difficult times. Their encouragement illuminated pathways I could not have traveled alone, emphasizing the transformative power of mentorship in fostering resilience and self-determination. By maintaining a consistent workout routine and becoming involved in a boxing club, I was able to distance myself from toxic thoughts. Boxing played a significant role in regaining focus and

physical transformation. In the middle of these challenges, however, I was spiritually empowered by the promise of help and salvation.

Therefore, even though it may seem perfect and all rosy to be a PhD student, the true challenge lies in the loneliness that accompanies leaving behind the mindset I developed while growing up. In fact, I experience a sense of belonging only to my life's purpose and what I developed through hard work—not to any specific place, family, culture, political group, or anything else.

### **Impact and Transformation**

These cumulative experiences have catalyzed significant personal and professional growth. I developed a strong new self-identity and gained a deeper understanding of inequities in the world and academia. My journey underscored the importance of advocating for marginalized voices and inspired a commitment to achieving a childhood dream. Being marginalized from various forms of support, as well as losing all close relationships, may not deter a person who values the righteous path of life in an unjust world. In fact, after all the people walk away from your life, the spirit will strike you. Although the odds were against me, I completed my doctoral journey in four years.

This narrative highlights the transformative potential of mentorship, spiritual strength, and self-resilience for first-generation minority-gifted students with large dreams. Establishing mentorship initiatives with selfless professors to provide guidance, staying true to my values, and distancing myself from negative influences will empower me on both my academic and personal journey.

### **Conclusion**

From a small-town upbringing to earning a doctorate abroad, my journey exemplifies the transformative power of mentorship and self-determination in overcoming significant challenges. This narrative is a testament to the resilience of first-generation students and underscores the transformative potential of education. Together, I have faced numerous adversities during my doctoral journey. Nevertheless, I can advocate for an academic journey that emphasizes resilience, spiritual connection, and mentorship, paving the way for success.

### **Bio**

MEHRDAD F. FALAVARJANI received a PhD in Applied Social Psychology from the Department of Psychology and Health Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. His research focuses on cross-cultural psychology,

specifically examining how cultural values and norms influence perceptions of fairness, justice, and assessment practices. His broader interests include cultural influences on moral judgment, psychological assessment, and community-based interventions. E-mail: [mehrdad.falavarjani@usask.ca](mailto:mehrdad.falavarjani@usask.ca)

## Chapter Eleven

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# Healing in Every Word

## Honoring Black Stories to Reclaim Joy and Justice

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### **Abstract**

This chapter examines the lasting impact of racialized trauma in educational spaces and the liberatory potential of storytelling as a method of healing, resistance, and reclamation. Through personal narrative, poetic inquiry, and the theoretical insights of bell hooks, Gholdy Muhammad, and Bettina Love, the author explores how Black students and educators navigate systems historically shaped by exclusion. Drawing on experiences from poetry circles and racial literacy work, the chapter highlights how narrative practices restore agency, affirm identity, and cultivate collective resilience. In centering ancestral pain and communal strength, this work envisions a future of education grounded in truth, freedom, and radical joy.

### **Keywords**

racialized trauma, storytelling as resistance, Black educators, poetic inquiry, racial literacy, resilience and healing

*There are some things we carry without ever speaking them aloud.*

*The weight of expectation.*

*The quiet fear of disappointing the ones who sacrificed everything.*

*The ache of becoming something they could never fully imagine, even as they prayed for it.*

I was the first in my family to earn a college degree — a reality that both honored and haunted me. There was no blueprint, no roadmap taped to the refrigerator door. Only whispered hopes and heavy silences that wrapped around me like a second skin. Every paper I wrote, every late night spent studying, felt like stitching a new story onto the bones of my family history — a story they longed for but could not always understand. I learned early that success would never feel weightless; it would always carry the grief of what was left unsaid, the loneliness of stepping into a world where there were no familiar faces waiting at the door. We did not see it — not fully.

They saw the diploma, the ceremony, the bright, staged photographs — but they could not see the nights I wanted to give up, the battles I fought quietly with myself, the moments when I questioned whether I even belonged. Success was not just mine; it was communal, ancestral, burdened and blessed all at once. I walked across that stage carrying more than my own dreams. I carried every unspoken prayer, every sleepless night, every sacrifice made in kitchens and factories and churches where they dared to believe that *maybe* — just maybe — I could be the one to break the cycle.

The pain I carry is not just my own—it is ancestral, collective, and deeply embedded in the fabric of a world that too often demands our silence. It lingers in the hushed stories of my elders, in the weary gazes of Black educators who have fought battles in classrooms, and in the hesitant voices of students who long to see themselves fully embraced in the curriculum. To carry pain is to carry history, a narrative written on our backs before we can even name it.

As a poet and educator, I capture this burden in my work, illuminating the intersection of racial identity, education, and healing. My poetic inquiry and reflective storytelling disrupt the silences imposed on Black educators and students, offering language to the pain that institutions often render invisible. This chapter explores the burdens of racialized trauma in education, the ways it shapes identity and learning, and the transformative power of storytelling as a tool

of both resistance and healing. Grounded in the scholarship of bell hooks (1994), Gholdy Muhammad (2020), Bettina Love (2019), and my own poetic pedagogy, I provide a personal narrative with critical analysis to illuminate how prominent black voices disrupt systems of oppression and reclaim agency in today's world.

## **The Burden of Racialized Trauma in Education**

Classrooms are not neutral spaces (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The reality is that they are microcosms of society shaped by the same forces of inequity that govern the world beyond their walls. For Black students and educators, racialized trauma does not begin or end at the school doors; it is carried in the body, in the psyche, or in the soul. Love (2019) described this as "spirit murdering," a term that encapsulates the emotional and psychological harm inflicted on Black students, who are denied the freedom to learn, dream, and thrive. All it takes is one moment, one act of dismissal, one microaggression to confirm that we are outsiders in spaces we have every right to inhabit. I have experienced this firsthand, navigating predominantly white institutions where my expertise was questioned, my voice silenced, and my presence othered. I have walked into rooms where my credentials precede me, but my skin renders them invisible... The trauma manifests in many ways: the erasure of Black narratives in curricula, the criminalization of Black youth through punitive discipline, the exhaustion of Black teachers expected to serve as both educators and de facto counselors for students navigating systemic oppression.

Research shows that black students are disproportionately suspended and expelled, a phenomenon that not only disrupts their education but also reinforces a carceral logic that criminalizes blackness itself (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As a black male educator, I have seen how these structural inequities push students to internalize the idea that their brilliance is a threat and that their very presence in academic spaces is an act of defiance. Instead of welcoming us with open arms and encouraging us to freedom dream, they overwhelm us to the point where we no longer even recognize our own voices.

## **The Power of Storytelling**

"Once you learn to read, you will be forever free" (Douglass, 1845). However, what happens when literacy itself becomes a battleground? When are the stories we read, write, and speak scrutinized, censored, or deemed unworthy? hooks (1994) reminds us that education can be the practice of freedom, but only when

it is rooted in truth-telling. Storytelling is an act of resistance, a refusal to let our histories be silenced or rewritten.

I embody this ethos through *Embracing Every Hue* (Phelps, 2023), where I amplify the lived experiences of Black educators and students. My poetry circles and mentorship practices create sacred spaces for storytelling, where pain and joy coexist, where narratives once deemed "too much" are celebrated in their fullness. Muhammad (2020) argues that culturally and historically responsive literacy must be at the heart of our pedagogy, ensuring that students see themselves in the texts they read and in the lessons they learn. Black storytelling is not just about pain—it is also about joy, about survival, and about imagining futures beyond oppression.

As a person of color who is also a poet, writer, educator, someone's brother, and son of a single mother, I have witnessed that students come alive when given a chance to write their own narratives, analyze literature that reflects their realities, and engage with history beyond the sanitized versions presented in mainstream textbooks. In my workshops, I encourage young writers to embrace vulnerability as strength and to craft counternarratives that assert their humanity. This practice fosters not only literacy but also liberation.

## **Healing through Collective Memory**

Healing begins with acknowledgment. Too often, institutions seek reconciliation without reckoning, offering empty platitudes instead of systemic change. However, true healing requires that we name the wounds inflicted by racism in education and work actively toward dressing the wound and, eventually, repairing it.

One powerful example of this work is the growing movement toward racial literacy, which challenges both educators and students in interrogating the ways in which races shape their lived experiences (Sealey-Ruiz, 2021). This practice is not just about recognizing injustice but also about developing the language and critical consciousness to dismantle it. My work contributes to this movement by using poetry as a vehicle for racial literacy, fostering conversations that challenge dominant narratives while affirming Black identity. When teachers commit to racial literacy, they cultivate classrooms where students are empowered to analyze and challenge the narratives that seek to define them. These practices not only help students process the pain they carry but also affirm their agency in shaping new narratives.

## The Call to Action: Toward a Liberatory Future

The pain I carry is heavy, but it is not hopeless. It is a reminder of the work that remains, the urgency of creating spaces where Black students and educators can breathe freely. It is a call to action for educators, scholars, and community members to move beyond performative allyship and toward real, systemic change. Liberatory education demands that we center Black voices not as an afterthought but as a foundation. It requires that we dismantle policies that criminalize Black students, advocate for culturally responsive pedagogy, and cultivate classrooms where storytelling is honored as both an intellectual and a spiritual practice.

The pain we carry is real, but so is the power we hold. In addition, in the act of naming, reclaiming, and reshaping our stories, we move closer to the liberation that we—and the generations that follow—*deserve*.

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**Bio:**

Dr. Darius Phelps (he/him) is a poet, writer, and scholar whose work centers the liberatory possibilities of poetic inquiry, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical literacy. A former elementary school teacher and now professor, he mentors pre-service educators in reimagining classrooms as spaces of resistance, restoration, and radical love. His scholarship amplifies the voices of historically marginalized students, exploring how poetry can serve as both pedagogy and prophecy. Drawing inspiration from Black literary traditions, personal narrative, and student testimony, Darius uses his own poetry to foster healing, identity reclamation, and joy in the margins. His work has been featured by NCTE, School Library Journal, and many others where he continues to advocate for education that honors everybody, every story, and every voice. E-mail: [dmp599@nyu.edu](mailto:dmp599@nyu.edu)



## Chapter Twelve

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# Ripples of Change

## A First-Generation Nepali Woman's Journey Through Academia

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter narrates the transformative journey of a first-generation Nepali woman who challenged patriarchal expectations and cultural norms to pursue higher education and earn a doctoral degree. Raised in a communal society that prescribed traditional gender roles, the author recounts the emotional, social, and financial struggles of leaving home at 18 to carve her own academic path. Her story reveals how experiences of isolation and unbelonging became catalysts for self-determination, personal growth, and intergenerational empowerment. By breaking from inherited expectations, the author not only reclaimed her own agency but also inspired her mother to rediscover her voice. This narrative highlights the enduring impact of first-generation women in reshaping familial and societal narratives around education, gender, and success.

### **Keywords**

first-generation woman, Nepali scholar, gender and education, intergenerational empowerment, cultural resistance, academic resilience

## INTRODUCTION

Being the first-generation Nepali *chbori* or daughter to attend university and eventually earn a doctorate was not just a personal milestone but an act of rebellion. To cross a river, one must find a bridge—my journey to my doctorate was often like forging that bridge on my own. It meant going beyond the *purkbyauli ritis* or traditional norms that demanded conformity and walking on a path filled with uncertainties. It was a journey of frustration, loneliness, anger, and above all, a huge feeling of discomfort. While balancing family, society, and academics, I kept on asking myself many times whether I fit anywhere at all. This story is about resistance to traditional expectations, persistence through alienation, and finally the redefinition of success for myself—and most importantly, my *aama*. My story elaborates on how breaking *purkbyauli ritis* and navigating unbelonging contributes to the greater call for freedom rooted in courage and relentless pursuit of change.

## PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Growing up as a child in a patriarchal, middle-class family in the lower belt of Nepal, life was steeped in *ritis* and expectations, especially as a *chbori*. Marriage by the early twenties was not just anticipated but celebrated as a rite of passage. For me, this became the first big hurdle. The moment I resisted, I was branded *ekalkate*—a term signifying stubborn and disobedient. My choices—from keeping boy-cut hair to continuing to wear pants and shirts instead of *kurtis*, a traditional attire, just because they were easy to wear—were laughed at and questioned. I was ridiculed for rejecting those very symbols of *purkbyauli ritis* that defined a *chbori*'s worth in my community. And the pressures were unending.

When I was 18, I made the transforming decision to leave my parents and move to another city for higher education, becoming the only daughter in the family to do so. It was like scaling an emotional mountain to convince my family. "What kind of dreams are these for girls to leave their parents' house before marriage?" a neighbor told my mother. That one comment spoke volumes of the disapproval of society and insinuated that my decision was unnatural and shameful. Yet, with the cautious blessing of my parents, I left.

Living alone was both liberating and profoundly difficult. Extraordinary discipline was needed to fund my studies through a full-time job. I juggled early morning shifts with late-night lectures, the long hours grinding my body and keeping my spirit on edge. Haunting self-doubt persecuted me. Would it be worth it? I would often find myself asking. The nights staring at a blank notebook, too

weariness even to focus, amplified my anxieties. Every exam that I studied for was overshadowed by fear-fear of failure, judgment, and of proving wrong those who had put their faith in me.

Social isolation deepened the challenge. My absence at family functions became gossip fodder among relatives. I was branded the misfit daughter who didn't belong. In the collectivist society of Nepal, belonging is so strongly associated with family and societal approval that this label served as an emotional burden. Every murmured comment, every raised eyebrow, represented a silent dismissal of my struggle, further dislocating me from the community I sought to help. This feeling of not fitting in was a source of quiet determination, yet it was one that was wrapped in self-doubt and loneliness.

In this isolation, I found small acts of rebellion that brought solace. Retreating into books, nurturing my curiosity, and finding strength in the stories of women who broke similar barriers kept me grounded. I clung to the belief that I could redefine success not just for myself but for those who shared my aspirations. This duality—of feeling excluded yet motivated—created a paradoxical drive to prove that societal rejection could be transformed into self-acceptance and growth.

With no familial roadmap to follow, my journey often felt like being adrift in uncharted waters. But I persisted. "Let me be the one to break the cycle," became my mantra. That determination, despite moments of despair, carried me forward.

## **OVERCOMING ADVERSITIES**

Amid judgment and alienation, I was fortunate to encounter women mentors who recognized my potential and shared their own stories of resilience. I found a support system in them. Many of my seniors on the PhD journey were trailblazers in their own right—women who walked miles daily to attend school or defied familial expectations to pursue higher education. Their resilience mirrored my own struggles and reminded me that I was not alone.

Over time, I began to see my difference not as a deficit but as a strength. It became an opportunity to inspire others and reshape what was considered possible. My younger cousin often cited me as her inspiration, saying, "I want to explore like you did." Her words ignited hope that my struggle was paving the way for others.

Acts of resistance slowly transformed into tools for empowerment. I started sharing my narrative through autoethnographic research and published them. Speaking openly about my journey, even in the face of skepticism, became a way to claim my identity. This helped me turn isolation into self-reliance and

channeled anger and frustration into determination. My love for books, once mocked, became my cornerstone of strength, and living on modest means turned into a lesson in resilience as I started supporting my family financially as well. With every step forward, I not only redefined success for myself but also reshaped what was imaginable for the women in my family and community. The ripple effect continued to inspire, proving that the challenges and sacrifices were part of a greater journey toward equity and justice.

## IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

Through this journey, I discovered a profound sense of purpose. The challenges I faced shaped my identity as a scholar, a woman, and an advocate for equity. Most of all, it helped me see myself beyond these identities under the shadow of other identities. Milestones such as earning my degree, presenting at conferences, and publishing research became testaments to resilience and the power of breaking barriers. What once felt like insurmountable struggles evolved into stepping stones toward a life others could aspire to.

Being labeled "*ekaltate*" transformed into a badge of honor as a standout in the family. I realized that my unbelonging was not a limitation but a catalyst, propelling me to create new narratives for women like me. My higher education empowered me to question, dismantle, and rebuild traditional notions of family and belonging. It offered personal growth and created opportunities for communal transformation.

This journey's impact was not confined to me alone. My *aama*, who had long placed her family's needs above her own, found courage through my example to reconnect with her dreams. She resumed her high school education, which she had left unfinished after marriage, and slowly rediscovered her passion for poetry. Watching her grow into her own identity as a poet was deeply moving. Her voice, once quieted by societal norms, now resonates in the pages of her published poetry book—a remarkable achievement for a 50 year woman who dared to reclaim her aspirations. My *aama*'s journey is evidence of this—a reminder that deeply entrenched norms can be reshaped by a single act of her *chbori*'s resistance.

## CONCLUSION

More broadly, my story shows the importance of creating spaces for first-generation students and women in higher education. By challenging societal expectations, we not only carve paths for ourselves but also create bridges for others to follow.

My life trajectory is about defying societal norms, stepping into spaces not designed for me, and leaving those spaces more inclusive for others who come next. It is about the power of daring to dream differently and the ripples such dreams create, not just for ourselves but for our families and communities.

This journey has shown me that change begins with a single step of defiance—a decision to question what has always been and imagine what could be. My story is not mine alone; it is also my *aama*'s, who rediscovered her voice through education and poetry, and my cousin's, who now dreams of charting her own path. These transformations affirm that struggles and victories can lay the foundation for a more equitable future.

As I reflect on my path, I hope it inspires others to embrace their differences, challenge the status quo, and relentlessly pursue their dreams. Together, we can cultivate a world where being “different” is celebrated, where women reclaim their agency, and where equality in education becomes not just an aspiration but a shared reality. Though the journey was difficult, the change it ignited was worth everything.

## BIO

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# Empowering Diversity in Nursing Academia

## A First-Generation Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

This chapter presents a reflective account of a first-generation university graduate's journey into nursing academia, highlighting the systemic barriers, cultural dislocation, and implicit biases encountered along the way. Through a lens grounded in racial justice, equity, and inclusion, the author explores the complex interplay between personal identity and professional advancement in higher education. Emphasizing the importance of resilience, emotional intelligence, and mentorship, the narrative illustrates how these factors shaped a career dedicated to advocating for diversity and inclusion in nursing education.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation university graduate, nursing education, diversity and inclusion, systemic barriers, equity in academia

## **INTRODUCTION**

Being the first in a family to enter higher education is to embrace an uncharted path, marked by hope and challenges alike; however, it is both a privilege and a responsibility, particularly within the context of nursing academia as a minority professional. For me, this journey led me to become a lecturer in nursing education, focusing on geriatric care and emotional intelligence. My journey has been shaped by experiences as a first-generation university student and later as a lecturer in Nursing Education at King's College London, where I focus on Nursing Care for Older Adults, which, if we look, is a group that sometimes can miss equity and inclusion in healthcare education. This chapter aims to unpack my experiences, shedding light on the systemic barriers faced by first-generation students and educators. I hope to inspire conversations about racial justice, inclusion, and equity in higher education by sharing how these challenges were navigated and transformed into opportunities.

## **PERSONAL NARRATIVE**

Growing up in a modest, traditional Portuguese family, my aspirations to pursue nursing and higher education were both celebrated and met with scepticism. Portugal's historical context—a nation emerging from years of dictatorship where education was undervalued—underscored the generational gap in understanding the transformative potential of academic achievement. My aspirations to pursue higher education often seemed audacious. While very supportive, my family lacked the resources to guide me through unfamiliar academic landscapes. I was acutely aware that my success carried the weight of generational dreams.

I was fortunate! My parents, Manuel and Maria Teresa, with limited formal education, made extraordinary sacrifices to ensure that I and my brother (André) could access opportunities they never had. My mother, in particular, instilled a love for learning, ensuring that I went beyond standard expectations in school (making me do more homework than everyone else). My primary school teacher, Rosa Branca, recognized my potential early, giving me leadership roles that inspired confidence and ambition. My parents never said no for a scholar activity or a book. I was the one with some insight into the economic challenges and refusing to get it and escaping to the library. Libraries and the local church became my sanctuaries, where I spent countless hours immersing myself in knowledge, laying the foundation for a lifelong love of learning (until the age of 16--17 years old).

My journey began in nursing. Entering nursing was driven by a desire to serve, but it was also a pragmatic choice in a field offering stability. My journey soon expanded internationally as I pursued opportunities in the UK, Spain, and Greece, enriching my understanding of integrative health practices, including traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Each step was a balancing act—honoring my cultural heritage while adapting to new environments. I had the opportunity to volunteer in Cape Verde, do an Erasmus in Lithuania, a project in Finland and, after my graduation, another Erasmus mobility project in Granada (Spain). Later, I wanted to expand my level of knowledge and understand other types of medicine and healing, and I did study traditional Chinese medicine (TCM). Each step brought challenges—from cultural dislocation to navigating systemic bias as a minority professional.

Pursuing advanced studies in nursing, business (MBA), emotional intelligence, and counseling was a testament to my commitment to lifelong learning. My journey culminated in roles at leading institutions, including King's College London, where I could combine my expertise in geriatric care, emotional intelligence, and moving and handling to shape the future of nursing education, making me reflect how humble and grateful I feel to have the support of my family, friends and teachers.

After working in Spain in several units, I traveled to the UK with my wife (Eduarda), and I started working in Orthopedics and Trauma. After that, I did demonstrate that I liked education and started teaching at a university. After some time, I transferred to King's College London, which was the turning point. As an immigrant and first-generation academic, I often found myself questioning whether I truly belonged; and being working in the Florence Nightingale Faculty of Nursing, Midwifery and Palliative Care, the school that I learned nearly 20 years ago, that was founded by Florence Nightingale, it fills me with pride and joy. Through this lens, I have completed projects that value emotional intelligence and cultural competence and plan to weave them into the fabric of nursing education to empower others from similar backgrounds.

## **CHALLENGES AND OVERCOMING ADVERSITY**

Moving to the UK presented a unique set of challenges. As an immigrant and nonnative English speaker (English being my fourth language), I often feel the weight of cultural dislocation. While a source of pride, my Portuguese heritage marked me as different in academic and clinical settings. Over time, I realized that my unique perspective enriched my contributions, particularly when I advocated for culturally responsive nursing education. Today, as a double-nationality

citizen, I am proud to say that I am British (the nation that allows me to share my work and accommodate me) and that I am Portuguese, a maternal country that allows me to live on this beautiful planet. Today, when I have the honor to be present in my student's graduation, I dress with typical British gowns... and I wear my Portuguese Academic Cape (a sign of Academia in Portugal). That is my way to homage both Countries that I am so proud to belong. Balancing the expectations of assimilation with a commitment to honoring my identity was a delicate act.

Today, as a dual citizen of Portugal and the UK, I find ways to celebrate both cultures. During graduation ceremonies, I wear traditional British academic gowns alongside my Portuguese academic cape, symbolizing the integration of my heritage and professional achievements. This personal tradition reflects my gratitude to both nations and serves as a visual reminder of the importance of cultural diversity in academia.

## **NAVIGATING ACADEMIC SYSTEMS AND THE BARRIERS**

As a first-generation academic, I faced numerous systemic challenges, including navigating unfamiliar institutional norms, language barriers, and financial constraints. Early in my career, I often felt isolated owing to the scarcity of role models who shared my background. The lack of institutional support for minority educators compounded these difficulties. My journey was supported by the presence of my wife, who shared similar experiences as a first-generation immigrant nurse. Together, we navigated the complexities of integrating into a new professional and cultural environment, providing mutual encouragement and resilience.

As a first-generation academic, I encountered structural barriers that compounded the challenges of teaching and research. Limited institutional support for minority educators often left me navigating unfamiliar systems alone. For instance, the lack of role models who shared my background underscored feelings of isolation.

## **SYSTEMIC DISCRIMINATION**

Implicit bias manifests in subtle yet impactful ways. As a minority educator, I encountered instances of microaggressions and implicit biases, often undermining my authority. From colleagues questioning my credentials to students expressing surprise at my academic position, these moments reflected broader systemic issues. The weight of proving one's worth often feels disproportionate compared with peers.

There were senior staff members (including managers) who thought that although I was competent, I was not smart enough and that I possibly had some mental issues, as my English was not polished as a native speaker. The regular questioning of my expertise by colleagues and students reflected broader systemic inequities. However, as Michelle Obama said, “When they go low, you go high”, this just fuels me to aim high and carry-on studying, working hard, publishing and sharing my truth.

## **BUILDING RESILIENCE**

Mentorship and international networks became my lifelines. Working with organizations such as the European Geriatric Medicine Society, the European Traditional Chinese Medicine Association, and Sigma Theta Tau International allowed me to connect with like-minded professionals committed to diversity and equity. Embracing emotional intelligence principles transformed how I approached challenges, fostering resilience and empathy. Participating, especially with Sigma Theta Tau, was very valuable, as it allowed me to learn with outstanding nurses (nationally and internationally) and contribute to several projects (local, national, and international). A turning point came when I integrated emotional intelligence (EI) into my professional practice. By understanding and managing my emotions, I found ways to navigate challenging interactions with empathy and resilience. EI became a cornerstone of my teaching philosophy, empowering students to approach care with the same compassion and self-awareness.

## **IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION**

Joining King’s College London as a Senior Teaching Fellow (and later being promoted as Lecturer in Nursing Education) marked a pivotal moment. Academia provides a platform to influence future generations of nurses, but it also exposes the systemic inequities that pervade higher education. Microaggressions and implicit biases were constant reminders of the work still needed to achieve equity. Nonetheless, I found strength in my dual identity as an academic and practitioner. My diverse background allowed me to connect with students from underrepresented communities, offering mentorship and a sense of belonging. It is key, especially when students are from other backgrounds, and recognizes that English is not their first language. I can sympathize, share tips and experiences and be motivated to continue their studies.

These experiences profoundly shaped my identity as an educator and advocate. Teaching modules such as “person-centered gerontological care” have been

instrumental in incorporating culturally responsive care into nursing curricula and have allowed me to weave themes of equity, inclusion, and cultural competence into nursing education. I teach this module in London (United Kingdom), Singapore and Nanjing (China). By incorporating case studies that reflect diverse patient populations, I aimed to prepare students for the realities of global healthcare.

My publications on emotional intelligence and integrative medicine have further emphasized the importance of inclusion in nursing education and practice. Recognition, as one of the 50 most influential international nurses in my institution's 50th-anniversary celebration, was a humbling affirmation of my efforts to advocate for diversity and excellence.

Researching and teaching emotional intelligence has been transformative. Through publications and workshops, I advocate for its integration into nursing curricula, particularly in the care of older adults. EI provides a framework for addressing not only patient needs but also the well-being of healthcare professionals. The systemic barriers I encountered highlight the urgent need for change in higher education. Institutions must implement mentorship programs, diversity training, and inclusive policies to support first-generation students and minority educators. By addressing these inequities, we can create environments where diverse voices thrive and contribute to meaningful societal change. My journey underscores the need for systemic change in higher education. Institutions must prioritize strategies that support first-generation students and minority educators. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, inclusive policies, and diversity training can help dismantle barriers and foster a more equitable academic environment.

## **CONCLUSION**

In reflecting on this journey, I am reminded of the transformative power of resilience, mentorship, and inclusion. The experiences of first-generation and minority professionals such as me serve as a call for action by academic institutions. By fostering equitable spaces, we not only empower individuals but also strengthen the broader fabric of society. Additionally, reflecting on this journey, I am struck by the interplay between personal growth and systemic change. The challenges I faced as a first-generation educator have shaped my commitment to fostering equity and inclusion in nursing academia.

Educators, policymakers, and institutions must take collective responsibility for creating equitable spaces in academia. By championing diversity and inclusion,

we can empower individuals from underrepresented backgrounds and strengthen the fabric of higher education. The journey of first-generation professionals should not be an exception but rather a celebrated norm. Together, we can build a future that honors and uplifts all voices.

## **BIO**

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## Chapter Fourteen

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# Bridging Cultural Worlds

## Applying Leavis and White's Pedagogies to Mexican American Education

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores how the educational philosophies of F.R. Leavis and Colin White can inform culturally responsive teaching strategies for Mexican American students. Grounded in principles of moral reflection, textual rigor, and contextual learning, both frameworks offer powerful tools for intellectual engagement across cultural boundaries. Drawing from personal experience as a student of Dr. Colin White, I demonstrate how these pedagogical approaches can foster critical thinking, affirm cultural identity, and deepen student engagement. By integrating Western intellectual traditions with the lived experiences of Mexican American learners, this chapter proposes an inclusive model of education that bridges cultural divides and promotes equity in the classroom.

### **Keywords**

Mexican American students, culturally responsive pedagogy, F.R. Leavis, Colin White, critical thinking, bicultural education, educational philosophy

## INTRODUCTION

As a Mexican American student navigating the complexities of two cultural environments, I have often been caught between two worlds. On the one hand is the rich tapestry of Mexican culture, with its deep historical roots, vibrant traditions, and communal values. On the other hand, the vast expanse of Western intellectual traditions has been shaped by centuries of philosophy, literature, and social thought. These two worlds are often seen as distinct, and they feel at odds in some contexts. However, I have come to recognize that certain educational philosophies can serve as bridges between these worlds, encouraging students like me to engage critically with both cultural spheres. Two such philosophies, those of F.R. Leavis and Colin White, have proven invaluable in my own educational journey. Both philosophers and educators advocate for intellectual engagement through rigorous analysis, moral reflection, and contextual learning, all of which can be applied to Mexican American students' unique cultural, social, and historical experiences. By combining their approaches, we can foster critical thinking and deeper engagement with both Western and Mexican American culture. As a Dr. White student, I have experienced how these philosophies resonate with the Mexican American experience, enriching my academic work and personal growth. In this chapter, I explore how the educational philosophies of F.R. Leavis and Colin White provide powerful strategies for intellectual engagement, particularly for Mexican American students. I will also reflect on my own experiences with Dr. White's methods and demonstrate how these ideas can help Mexican American students navigate their cultural identity, develop critical thinking skills, and achieve a deeper understanding of both Western and Mexican American traditions.

## F.R. LEAVIS: THE POWER OF RIGOROUS ANALYSIS AND MORAL REFLECTION

F.R. Leavis, a British literary critic (born July 14, 1895, , Cambridgeshire, Eng.—died April 14, 1978, Cambridge), is best known for his emphasis on the importance of rigorous analysis in literary studies. His educational philosophy advocates for a detailed, nuanced reading of texts, paying close attention to their moral and intellectual implications. Leavis believed that literature is not just an aesthetic exercise but a powerful tool for moral reflection. Through his method of close reading, students are encouraged to grapple with the ethical dimensions of texts, to question prevailing ideologies, and to engage in self-reflection. I believe that this approach can be extended to any academic field. Whether in the natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities, rigorous analysis and careful reading can yield deeper insights into the subject matter at hand. In fields such

as history or sociology, for example, students can benefit from a Leavis-inspired method that encourages them to question established narratives and challenge the assumptions that often go unexamined. The ethical implications of these subjects can be explored with the same intensity as the moral questions raised in literature.

In the realm of science, Leavis's emphasis on careful, reflective reading could be applied to the way research is conducted and interpreted. Researchers might be encouraged to engage not only with the technical aspects of their work but also with its potential social and ethical consequences. For example, in fields such as biotechnology or artificial intelligence, where the impact of scientific advancements can be profound, a Leavis approach could foster greater attention to the ethical considerations of these innovations.

In the social sciences, especially in disciplines such as economics and political science, a focus on the ethical and intellectual implications of theories and models could lead to a more nuanced understanding of how they shape real-world outcomes. Students and scholars could be pushed to consider the human consequences of economic policies or political decisions, encouraging more empathetic and responsible engagement with the issues at hand.

Overall, the application of Leavis's method across disciplines can foster a more holistic and thoughtful approach to knowledge. By encouraging students and scholars not only to analyze the technical or factual content of their respective fields but also to examine their moral and intellectual dimensions, we can promote a more responsible, reflective form of learning that is attuned to the complexities of the world in which we live.

For Mexican American students, this approach offers a valuable means of engaging with both Western and Mexican American contexts. The intellectual rigor promoted by Leavis encourages students to move beyond surface-level readings of texts or research papers and to consider the deeper moral and social issues they raise. For example, when prominent Western authors such as Shakespeare, explore Mexican writers such as Juna Rulfo or American writers such as Sandra Cisneros or Tomas Rivera, Leavis' emphasis on moral reflection provides a framework for students to reflect on their own lives and the ethical dilemmas they encounter.

In my present academic journey, Leavis' approach is particularly resonant with the present knowledge that various forms of artificial intelligence (AI) applications that are being deployed and used in many healthcare systems fail by potentially perpetuating bias. I believe that Leavis' emphasis on the

importance of close reading and critical reflection—encouraging a deeper engagement with academic work to uncover its underlying moral and intellectual implications—can be effectively applied to the field of AI. This method of scrutiny aligns with current concerns about AI technologies, where the ethical dimensions of their design and deployment are often overlooked. Similar to the need to analyze literary works beyond their aesthetic value, we must examine AI not only for its technological capabilities but also for its potential to reinforce existing social inequalities. AI systems, especially those used in healthcare, are often trained on large datasets that can reflect historical biases present in society. These biases can manifest in ways that disproportionately affect certain demographic groups or economically disadvantaged populations. For example, if an AI algorithm is trained on a dataset that lacks diverse representations or is influenced by biased assumptions, it could perpetuate disparities in diagnosis, treatment recommendations, and access to care. Leavis' method of questioning prevailing ideologies and engaging in self-reflection can be applied here, urging us to critically assess the data and systems driving AI development.

By using Leavis' model of close reading and moral reflection, we can push for a more nuanced and responsible approach to the creation and use of AI in healthcare. It is essential to consider not only the technical efficiency of AI systems but also the ethical implications of their design. Just as Leavis encouraged readers to examine the deeper meanings of literary works, we must also probe the underlying biases in AI technologies, asking questions about their potential to harm vulnerable populations or reinforce existing power structures. This ethical inquiry could lead to a more equitable and responsible integration of AI in healthcare, which aligns with the principles of fairness, transparency, and social justice. Overall, Leavis' method pushes students to confront tough questions about society, identity, and ethics, helping them develop the skills necessary for navigating the social and cultural realities of their own lives.

### **COLIN WHITE: CONTEXTUAL LEARNING AND CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT**

While F.R. Leavis focuses on the importance of rigorous textual analysis, Colin White's educational philosophy adds another crucial layer by emphasizing the role of context in understanding both texts and the world. White advocates for a more interdisciplinary approach to learning, where students examine texts not only for their internal meaning but also considering the historical, social, and political contexts in which they were produced. This method allows students to connect the content of literature with the lived experiences of individuals and communities, including their own experiences. By recognizing

the broader circumstances that shape a text, White's approach encourages a deeper understanding of how literature reflects and engages with the complexities of society, power, and identity.

This approach not only focuses on the words on the page but also urges readers to ask critical questions about the conditions under which a text was created, its potential biases, and its impact on different audiences. It challenges students in recognizing that literature, like any other form of knowledge, is shaped by its time, place, and value. By encouraging students to think about texts in a more holistic way, White's approach fosters a sense of empathy, critical thinking, and historical awareness that enriches their understanding of both the text and the world.

This approach is highly important in the design of artificial intelligence models, particularly when working with complex multimodal datasets where an interdisciplinary approach is needed. Much like the need to consider the historical, social, and political contexts in which literature was produced, AI development requires a similar understanding of the broader contexts in which algorithms and models were created and operated. AI systems are increasingly built using vast datasets that include not only technical data but also human-centered data such as language, behavior, and social interactions. These datasets are inherently shaped by the historical and cultural contexts in which they are created. Without taking these factors into account, AI models can easily inherit and perpetuate existing biases or reinforce harmful stereotypes.

On the other hand, an interdisciplinary approach to AI development would encourage collaboration across fields such as computer science, biology, medicine, ethics, sociology, philosophy and history. This would ensure that the design of algorithms is not isolated from the social realities and lived experiences that those algorithms impact. For example, when designing AI models for healthcare, an interdisciplinary perspective would require us to consider not only the technical aspects of the system but also the historical inequalities and biases that may be embedded in medical data, as well as the social contexts in which patients live. By integrating diverse perspectives, AI designers can create more equitable systems that consider the complexities of human society and avoid reinforcing harmful patterns of discrimination. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach in AI, much like Colin White's emphasis on contextual analysis in the literature, can help create technologies that are not only efficient and innovative but also ethically sound and socially responsible. This ensures that AI development is mindful of the broader implications it has for individuals, communities, and society.

In the case of Mexican American students, White's approach is invaluable because it invites them to contextualize their cultural experiences within broader historical and social frameworks. Many Mexican American students come from communities shaped by migration, colonization, and systemic inequality. Understanding these historical forces is essential for fully appreciating the cultural narratives they encounter in the literature and other fields. White's method encourages students to consider how these social and political contexts inform their own identities and experiences.

Through my experiences with Dr. White, I have come to understand the significance of contextual learning. In one of his courses, we studied *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, a text that addresses issues of poverty, migration, and the American Dream. Dr. White encouraged us to read the novel not only as literary work but also as a product of the historical context of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. This understanding helped me connect the struggles of the Joad family to the broader experiences of Mexican American migrant communities, who similarly faced exploitation and marginalization during the same time. As I reflected on these connections, I realized that these communities—often overlooked in mainstream historical narratives—have played a critical role in shaping the development of America.

The Mexican American migrant workers, along with other marginalized groups, were essential to the country's agricultural backbone, providing the labor that sustained industries during tough economic times. Despite facing systemic discrimination and socioeconomic challenges, their resilience has contributed significantly to the fabric of American society. By recognizing their struggles, not only can we appreciate their contributions, but we can also understand how their experiences helped form a more complex narrative of the American Dream—one that includes the voices of all people, especially those who have been marginalized.

Dr. White's approach allowed me to see that the hardships and triumphs of these communities were not isolated but rather integral to the larger story of the nation's development. This recognition deepens our understanding of American history and underscores the importance of acknowledging diverse perspectives in shaping both past and present societal structures. It became clear to me that the struggles and perseverance of Mexican American migrant communities, such as the Joad family's, were not just footnotes in history but were foundational to the growth and evolution of America. This broader understanding of history has inspired me to continue exploring how contextual learning can help illuminate the experiences of other underrepresented communities and how their contributions have influenced the nation's development in profound ways.

## **THE INTEGRATION OF LEAVIS AND WHITE: A DUAL APPROACH TO INTELLECTUAL ENGAGEMENT**

The combination of F.R. Leavis' emphasis on rigorous analysis and Colin White's focus on contextual learning offers a powerful intellectual framework for Mexican Americans and for any students. Together, these approaches enable students to engage in academic work and research not only on a moral and intellectual level but also within the broader social and historical contexts that shape their lives. This dual approach fosters critical thinking and encourages students to reflect on the ethical implications of their work while also connecting these ideas to their own lived experiences. In practice, this means that students can apply both Leavis analysis and White's contextual learning to a wide range of academic work. Leavis' approach encourages students to focus on the text itself, evaluating its literary merits, structure, and language, whereas White's contextual approach invites students to engage with the broader historical, social, and cultural contexts surrounding the text. By combining these two methods, students can gain a more nuanced understanding of the material, balancing an appreciation for the intricacies of the work with an awareness of its external influences. At the same time, students can apply White's contextual approach by considering the historical and social forces that shaped their own experience during the time in which the research product or work is set. This includes examining the experiences of marginalized groups, such as the aftermath of the Chicano civil rights movement in the United States and reflecting on how these experiences have been represented in various forms of cultural production. For example, students can explore how the experiences of Chicano communities—such as struggles for political recognition, labor rights, or cultural preservation—have influenced the development of literature, art, and political discourse in the U.S. By acknowledging these factors, students are better equipped to understand how literature and cultural work can serve as both a reflection of and a response to social conditions. Furthermore, this approach encourages deeper engagement with the intersectionality of race, class, gender, and power dynamics in shaping individuals' and communities' lived realities. Students are urged to look beyond just the text or artifact, considering how these intersecting forces may have shaped the creators of such works and the audiences they addressed. This contextual analysis fosters critical thinking, allowing students to draw connections between historical events and the ongoing struggles faced by communities today, thereby enriching their academic work with both a historical perspective and a present-day relevance.

By integrating both methods, students gain a more holistic understanding of their work and their studies. They can engage with different academic areas in ways that

resonate with their own cultural, social, and historical experiences, developing a deeper sense of intellectual and moral agency. This dual approach encourages them to not only absorb information but also critically analyze and apply it within the context of their lived experiences and the diverse perspectives around them. As they explore different viewpoints, they become more adaptable thinkers who are able to navigate complex issues with empathy, creativity, and a sense of responsibility. Furthermore, this integration fosters a learning environment that values collaboration and inclusivity, where students are empowered to contribute meaningfully to discussions, challenge existing assumptions, and innovate solutions that reflect a broader understanding of the world. In this way, the combination of diverse methods equips students with the tools they need to approach their academic and professional journeys with confidence, ethical consideration, and a commitment to lifelong learning.

## CONCLUSION

The educational philosophies of F.R. Leavis and Colin White offer invaluable strategies for engaging not only Mexican American students but also any students in critical thinking, moral reflection, and contextual learning. Through Leavis' emphasis on rigorous textual analysis and White's focus on contextual understanding, students can navigate the complexities of both different perspectives and cultures, developing a deeper and more balanced understanding of their own identities and the world around them. This intellectual growth, when applied in collaborative settings, has the added benefit of enhancing teamwork and collective problem solving. By integrating these approaches into group dynamics, students learn to respect and engage with diverse viewpoints, which fosters greater inclusivity and mutual understanding. Leavis' method of careful analysis trains students to examine ideas with precision, whereas White's contextual focus ensures that broader perspectives are also considered, leading to well-rounded discussions. When students work together in teams, they can combine their individual strengths, each bringing their unique cultural and intellectual perspectives to the table. This not only enriches the learning experience but also allows for more effective problem solving, as teams with diverse approaches can address complex issues from multiple angles. Furthermore, the skills developed through these methods—critical thinking, moral reflection, and contextual understanding—are essential for cultivating a sense of collective responsibility within teams. Students will not only be able to identify and analyze problems but also be equipped to address them in ways that reflect ethical considerations and cultural awareness. As they learn to engage deeply with material and with one another, they will be better prepared to collaborate in meaningful, productive ways, using their collective knowledge and

experiences to create solutions that are both innovative and respectful of the diverse world they inhabit. This synergy within teams not only fosters stronger academic outcomes but also promotes a shared sense of purpose, empowering students to act with a greater sense of agency and responsibility toward their communities and the world at large. By becoming aware of how their learning intersects with broader societal contexts, students are not only prepared to excel academically but also primed to become thoughtful, ethical, and active participants in a rapidly changing world. The integration of these philosophies thus creates a framework for students to build meaningful connections, foster empathy, and drive through thoughtful collaboration, preparing them for leadership roles in both their professional and personal lives.

## **BIO**

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# From Migrant Farmworkers to Educators

## One Family's Journey

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### **Abstract**

This paper shares a family's emotional and transformative journey from migrant farmworkers to educators in deep South Texas. This narrative, shared through the voices of the Silva siblings, honors their humble beginnings, their determination to overcome challenges, and the lessons instilled in them through a foundation of hard work, respect, and racial justice. Many lessons are shared, but one profound lesson is their understanding that educators must listen to their students, encourage them to share their stories and document their family histories. This practice not only strengthens their identities but also amplifies their impact as educators, echoing beyond the classroom and into the lives of their communities.

### **Keywords:**

first-generation students, migrant farmworkers, Hispanic families, educational resilience, minority-serving institutions, family narratives, racial justice, cultural identity, transformative education, community impact

As first-generation, low-income, Hispanic students, we fit into several categories that, according to the United States Department of Education, suggest a need for support. Despite these markers, our experiences shaped our future and led us to work at a minority-serving institution, where we are positively impacting students' lives.

Our parents, Deciderio G. Silva and Susana Solis Silva, had seven children and instilled in us the importance of education, culture, and family, which has guided our personal and professional journeys. Our father, Deciderio, lost both of his parents at a young age and took on the responsibility of raising his younger brother and sister. When he met our mother, Susana, it was understood that his siblings would always be part of their family. Together, they provided for us as migrant farmworkers, working long hours in the fields and packing sheds. Our aunt, Tia Lala, helped us care for us at home, offering love and support when both parents were at work.

Despite the financial hardships, our parents emphasized the importance of education, ensuring that we attended school even during the busy harvest months. The values learned through this experience continue to resonate with us as educators today.

### **Mother's Tree Story – Unshakable Foundation**

A pivotal moment in our family's educational philosophy comes from the story our mother shared about her own schooling. In elementary school, they draw a line on the board and lecture. She told her that the White race was represented by the tree's branches, flowers, and leaves, whereas Mexicans were merely the roots, unseen and beneath the ground. That story stayed with my mother, but she did not let it make her feel unworthy, for she concluded that being the root was not a bad thing—for it is the root that gives the tree life. The strength of the root determines the life of a tree. Our mother vowed to make her families' tree strong, good and meaningful with a deep sense of serving others and always being proud of their roots.

### **Our mother always kept her promises.**

We were raised with the strong sense of power and influence that our home and culture represented, contributing to our drive for education and success. It is this pedagogy of home that was vital to our very existence.

Our lives, very much like those akin to our background, were filled with struggle. However, just as prevalent was the theme that our roots were grounded so deeply

in our culture and the love of family that has shaped us. The love and support we were blessed with was what propelled us to improve our lives through education, pride in our culture, and our community. It is the stories from our family and the *consejos* we received from our parents that have been etched in our minds and in our hearts.

We have grown from this familial education and have used it as the core that we build from. The teachings of our parents and extended family are all we have from them. Although both our parents have died, we are all an extension of their lives. We must keep this learnedness present and current in our lives and, most importantly, in the lives of our families. We must not lose that connection to our history, and the path to that history can be kept relevant by sharing the stories of our grandparents and parents with our youth.

Our parents' experiences reflected a deep sense of pride in our culture, and their teaching influenced our commitment to education. This pedagogy of home, founded in love, respect, and familial wisdom, became the bedrock of our educational success. Through hard work, love, and the guidance of our parents, we were able to overcome struggles and thrive in education and beyond.

### **Growing Up “Migrant”**

Growing up in Mercedes, Texas, in the 1950s and 1960s, we were sheltered by the closeness of our family. Our parents worked tirelessly, never pulling us out of school to help with fieldwork during the summer. Although we were poor, the importance of education was clear, and our parents made sure that school was never secondary to work. Our experiences as migrant farmworkers taught us to value education, even as we encountered challenges outside our hometown. Our parents' unspoken emphasis on education was evident. Unlike other migrant families, we were never pulled from school early to work, ensuring that we started every school year on time. Our parents did not want us to be ridiculed for starting school later than our peers. Importantly, we have the same opportunities as other nonmigrant families do. This commitment laid the groundwork for our academic and personal success.

### **Challenges and Overcoming Adversity**

Our family's struggles took us beyond Mercedes, as we worked in various packing sheds across Texas and California. These trips exposed us to harsh realities, such as poor living conditions in migrant camps and discrimination in other parts of the country. One significant experience occurred when we arrived at a migrant camp in Muleshoe, Texas, to find the living conditions unacceptable. We arrived at a

place that was filthy, and it was then that we saw firsthand our mothers' strength and resolve. Our parents went to the office to speak to the owner of the field we were to work in, and she simply told them that he needed to find a suitable place for us to live in or that we were heading back home. There was no doubt that we needed to work, but she was not going to allow her family to live in filth. Our mother's strength and advocacy led the owner of the migrant camp to provide better accommodations for our family. This experience taught us the importance of self-advocacy, even in difficult circumstances.

We also faced racial prejudices, such as when our brother encountered hostile reactions at a local barber shop or when he was forced to use a segregated restroom as a young teenager. As our brother walked into the local barber shop during one of our stops, he remembered the icy stares and sneers that greeted him. He was fourteen, and he did not understand. When the barber finally got around to cut his hair, he made it very clear that he needed to see the barber on the opposite side of town the next time he needed a haircut.

On another such occasion, he remembers needing to visit the bathroom at the local city park. The restrooms were centrally located, and as he walked up, he noticed signs on two different doors: one read Whites, the other Colored, he was thirteen years old. As he pondered which he was, even at that tender age, he understood who had put those signs there. These early experiences with discrimination, although challenging, shaped our understanding of the world and deepened our resolve to succeed.

### **Impact and Transformation**

Despite these challenges, we have each achieved a level of success owing to the lessons learned from our parents. Our mother's "Guerrera Spirit" – her warrior spirit – resonates in each of us. We are reminded of her belief in the power of education, a value she instilled in all of her children. Elizabeth, the youngest sibling, recalled how reading an article by Bianca Guzman about the "power of education" immediately reminded her of our mother's spirit. Guzman speaks of being "cognizant of the power of education". This was our mother's core belief, and she engrained this in all her children.

Our parents taught us the importance of education not only for practical purposes but also as a means of escaping the hardships they endured. However, education was not just about academic achievement. It was about preserving our culture, respecting our family, and understanding the importance of service to others. As we've navigated our educational journeys, we've drawn strength

from our familial education, which remains at the core of our lives and works as educators.

We were exposed to stories or testimonies of our parents as they worked in the fields and migrated for work. We recall stories of their working in the fields as planes sprayed them with pesticides because the landowners did not want to waste time by letting them leave the fields as they sprayed. Our parents were both diagnosed with bone cancer, and it is our belief that constant exposure to pesticide poisoning caused their cancer.

The lessons learned from our parents—their unwavering belief in education, cultural pride, and service to others—have shaped our lives. The ability to grow up as migrants is instilled in us the determination to overcome obstacles and the value of lifelong learning. These teachings became the foundation for our careers as educators and community advocates.

In our work, we recognize that students come to us not as blank slates but as individuals shaped by their own family histories and cultural experiences. Understanding the pedagogies of the home, including the *mestiza* consciousness our mother instilled in us, can help us better serve students, especially those from diverse backgrounds. We believe that acknowledging and respecting these cultural foundations is key to engaging students in meaningful learning experiences. Recognizing and valuing these pedagogies of home enrich the educational experience and foster cultural synergy. By celebrating the cultural and social capital students bring to the classroom, we can create meaningful learning environments that honor diversity and encourage success.

Students come to us with a set of skills imparted at home. These skills provide a solid foundation for learning. Acknowledging the pedagogies of the home can lead to a deep understanding of a diverse student population. We should work each day to improve the quality of education, creating greater awareness and sensitivity for the gender, racial and cultural needs of our students. We must work to achieve the type of synergy that values the cultural and social capital that our students bring to school.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our educational journey reflects the deep roots of family, culture, and resilience, which have shaped our success. Three of us earned doctorate degrees, while the others pursued bachelor's and associate degrees, but all of us share a common understanding: it was our education at home, alongside formal schooling, that enabled us to overcome the challenges we faced.

We have all struggled and have all overcome many obstacles. As we have often discussed, we could not have succeeded without what we learned at home. The confidence we have comes from our mother and the *mestiza consciousness* that she instilled in us all. We have a strong identity. The oppression and the attempts at silence and excluding us were not stronger than our pedagogy of home. Home is where we learned not just to survive but to thrive. It is our dedication, loyalty and commitment to family that serves as a stimulus for school success. One of the many lessons learned and one that has guided us all is to be of service to others.

Our journey from migrant farmworkers to educators is a testament to the power of family, culture, and education. It is a reminder to all educators of the profound impact they can have when they embrace and nurture the unique backgrounds of their students. We carry forward the lessons of our parents, striving to serve others and inspire future generations to honor their roots while reaching stars.

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