

The image features a hand holding a white book with a black border. The book's cover has the title 'Tales of Tenacity: from First Gen Wolverines' written on it. The background is a vibrant blue pattern filled with various icons representing technology, such as gears, lightbulbs, binary code (010100, 10100 110110), a globe, a bar chart, a pie chart, a laptop, a server rack, and a network diagram. The book is being held over a stack of several yellow books with black outlines, suggesting a library or a collection of literature.

Tales of Tenacity:

from

First Gen
Wolverines

Wolverzine Volume 7 - First Gen Special Issue

At the University of Michigan, undergraduates and graduate students are considered first-generation college students if neither parent or guardian has completed a 4-year college or university degree. This definition includes students with other family members (siblings, cousins, grandparents, etc.)

All art and work by University of Michigan students, staff, and faculty.

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Tales of Tenacity: from First Gen Wolverines

Being a first-generation student feels like juggling without ever having learned the act. No matter how hard you try to keep everything in motion, there's a constant fear of dropping the ball.

Being a first-generation student feels like speaking a language no one has taught you. Every conversation is a lesson, but misunderstanding is a frequent companion.

Being a first-generation student feels like being the only one without an umbrella in a rainstorm. You're constantly adapting to circumstances that others seem prepared for.

Being a first-generation student feels like trying to build a bridge without blueprints. Every step is foreign, yet you know reaching the other side is essential.

Being a first-generation student is a journey of growth. With every hurdle passed, you pave the way for others to follow, proving to yourself that you are capable of great things.

The first-gen journey is not just about personal growth but about opening doors for those who will walk this path after you. This special edition of the Wolverzine showcases the struggles and accomplishments of not only the first generation students here on UM-Dearborn's campus but also the first-gen faculty and staff. These stories reflect the courage and determination that each first-gen embodies.

This project has been in the works for over a year, and I could not be more proud and excited to share it with you all. This project would not have been possible without the amazing student and faculty Zboard members, as well as all of the student, faculty, and staff members who submitted pieces. Thank you for supporting First Generation Students on our campus, and I hope you enjoy Tales of Tenacity: from First Gen Wolverzines.

Anna Lariviere

First Generation Student Organization President



They Made a Mistake by Troy Murphy

“They made a mistake.” “There were fewer people that applied this year.” “They lowered their standards.” “I just got lucky.” “I think someone was just doing a favor for my high school counselor or teacher.”

For some students – and more first generation students than almost any other demographic – the very first feeling they don’t “belong” in college is the acceptance notification. It’s a subtle feeling that you are about to enter into a place where everybody around you is more qualified than you are. Smarter. More prepared. And certainly more capable of success.

Research suggests that first generation college students are more likely to experience many of these feelings -- what is often called the “imposter syndrome” or “imposter phenomenon” -- that sense of not truly belonging, just acting like an “imposter” until you are found out! The result is often that first gen students don’t take advantage of many resources on campus, they get involved less, have fewer relationships with faculty. This go-it-alone-or-I-might-get-found-out response only exacerbates the stress of college. Even when student abilities are proven (good grades, compliments from professors, etc.), students still often feel they are just fooling people and it’s only a matter of time!

In a recent study (2024) Chelsey Holden in her colleagues suggest that “being the first” in a family to attend college carries with it a high burden of expectations for success: “As these expectations increase, so, too, do the feelings that they may be incapable or unworthy of

actually meeting those expectations.” The good news is that studies suggest even simple activities – getting involved, visiting a learning center, joining a club (such as the First Generation Student Organization!), going to professor office hours -- can have a lasting impact. One recent study (Ramsey & Brown, 2017) suggests that taking advantage of a University library and all it has to offer can serve as a fantastic way to get connected and feel at home. So check out the Mardigian, hang out for a while, attend a library event, and you might lessen those feelings!

Most of all, with upwards of 50 percent of all UM Dearborn students now First Generation students, we all have to remind ourselves that this is *exactly* where we belong!

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Holden, C. L., Wright, L. E., Herring, A. M., & Sims, P. L. (2024). Imposter Syndrome Among First- and Continuing-Generation College Students: The Roles of Perfectionism and Stress. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 25(4), 726-740.

Ramsey, E., & Brown, D. (2017). Feeling like a fraud: Helping students renegotiate their academic identities. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 25(1), 86-90.

Growth Through the SURE Program

By Amalia Jamaludin

My journey as a SURE researcher began with an exciting opportunity: meeting with my professor, Dr. Antonious Koumpias, to discuss potential research projects. I didn't have a specific idea in mind, but I was eager to take on a challenge and dive deeper into my fields of study, software engineering and economics. I was fortunate to meet a professor who saw my potential and was willing to help me grow into it. Even though I didn't know exactly what I wanted, I knew I was ready to learn and explore.

The research we embarked on was in the field of health economics, an area that was completely new to me. I also had the privilege of meeting another student, Mouhamadou, from Ann Arbor. He was completing a similar summer research experience and became an incredible source of inspiration. Together, we navigated the complexities of research, and with his guidance—particularly with Stata, the statistical software we used for analysis—I gained my first hands-on experience with the research process.

Stata, which is widely used in economics, allows researchers to perform data management, statistical analysis, and create visualizations. Mouhamadou, who has been Dr. Koumpias' research assistant for the past two years, was particularly helpful in sharing his expertise and guiding me through the intricacies of using Stata efficiently. This process opened my eyes to the ways in which technology, especially software engineering, intersects with fields like economics and healthcare.

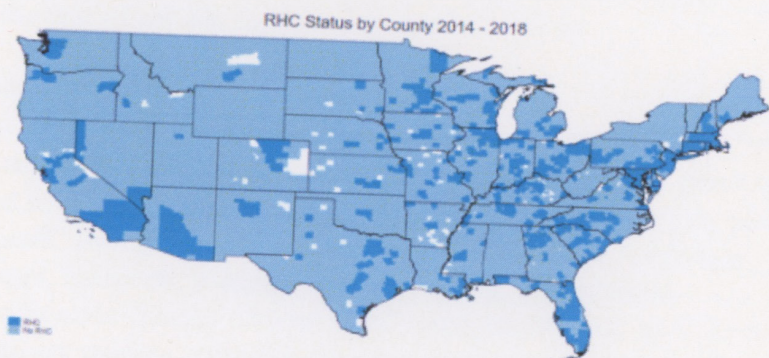
As we worked through the project, I realized how much research involves—conducting thorough statistical analysis, manipulating data to reveal insights, and creating visualizations that help others understand our findings. I gained a deeper understanding of models and their outcomes, and my biggest achievement was learning to use Stata effectively.

Despite our different campuses—Ann Arbor and Dearborn—the research opportunities Mouhamadou and I were exposed to were remarkably similar. It was reassuring to know that no matter where we study, we can still engage with important research that has real-world applications. Working on this project deepened my understanding of statistical models, data manipulation, and visualization, and it was incredibly rewarding to see our analysis come together.

One of the most eye-opening lessons I took away from this experience was recognizing the interconnectedness of fields. Technology, particularly software engineering, plays a crucial role in many areas beyond traditional applications. It helps solve complex problems efficiently by integrating equations and models, and this research demonstrated how closely intertwined technology and economics can be.

Another significant realization was the flexibility that economics research offers. Unlike lab-based disciplines, much of our work could be done remotely, as long as we had access to a laptop with the necessary statistical tools. This flexibility was invaluable, especially during the summer, as

it allowed me to manage my time effectively while still producing meaningful outcomes. It also underscored the ways in which software engineering can be applied to uncover real-world insights.



I am particularly proud of the work we accomplished, especially the visualization map I created comparing wait times for medical appointments in counties with and without retail health clinics (RHCs). This visualization provided a clearer understanding of the disparities in healthcare access and underscored the importance of the insights we uncovered. I believe our research offers valuable contributions to understanding healthcare in the United States and highlights the need for further awareness of the system's

As a first-generation student, I often feel timid and out of place when talking to my peers about their parents' careers and the insights they have into future career paths. As I navigate university life, I've met people from diverse backgrounds, and over time, I've realized that we all share a common goal: to create a better future for ourselves. Programs like the SURE research opportunity have been

instrumental in bridging the gap, showing me that I too can make meaningful contributions to the world.

Determination: My First Gen Story

Gabriella Scarlatta
The University of Michigan-Dearborn

I wasn't meant to go to university. My parents' plan was for me to work in my mother's *panetteria* store, eventually take it over, and spend the rest of my life there and in our hometown.

But I had a different path in mind.

Since my first year in middle school, I had been telling my parents I wanted to go to university. Their response was always: "Yeah, yeah, of course!" In high school, I often expressed my love for foreign languages, literature, reading, and storytelling. Their casual responses were always, "Brava. That's nice, interesting, bene, bene." Though my parents often fought, they were unusually united in their resistance to my educational aspirations, which made me both suspicious and a little scared

My father was a baker, and my mother sold his breads and other specialties like brioches, breadsticks, cookies, cured meats, and candies in her store. When my mother bought a new, prominent store on the chicest pedestrian street downtown and told me it was for me to eventually take over, my suspicions grew. My concerns were always met with a vague, "But of course, don't worry, we'll see."

Fast forward to May of my senior year in high school (Italian high schools have five years), it was time for my parents to commit to letting me enroll at a university. It was just a matter of where, as my hometown didn't have one. I could either go to the Università di Torino or to l'Université de Savoie in Chambéry, France. My region, Aosta Valley, is bilingual, with French and Italian equally taught and spoken, so either was an option. When I received a full

scholarship to attend the university in Chambéry and loving France, it was an easy decision.

My high school principal organized a campus visit to the university and invited me to join. All I needed was a 50,000 lire registration fee, fully refundable, to secure my spot for the upcoming academic year. It was time for my parents to turn their “but of course” into “go ahead and register, here’s the 50,000 lire!” They promised me the money—after all, I had been working in my mother’s store and my father’s bakery every summer since I was 12. But the week before I was scheduled to go to France, they decided to take a trip, just the two of them.

They assured me they’d leave the money in their bedroom drawer where they kept cash, documents, and jewelry. When I checked, the drawer was empty. Desperate, I asked my brothers for help, but they had no money to spare.

That night, I sobbed on the phone to my parents, convinced they didn’t want me to go to college and didn’t love me. My father insisted he had forgotten and told me, “Just go see Signor Caridi, my friend. Tell him I will reimburse him, and he will give you the money.”

Embarrassed and humiliated at the thought of asking a near-stranger for money, I felt hopeless. But my father insisted. So, if I wanted to go to college, I had no choice but to visit Signor Caridi. He owned a furniture store and was friendly but always busy. When I entered, a salesperson approached me. In a trembling voice, I said I was Francesco Scarlatta’s daughter and was there to see Signor Caridi. “Ah, sì, the baker! I know him. I’ll get Signor Caridi straight away.” That interaction left me petrified and insecure, but then I heard a warm voice calling my name. Signor Caridi was walking towards me and seemed to recognize me.

“How can I help you?” he asked. I was too embarrassed to speak.

But sensing my unease, he made small talk: “How old are you?”

“Who are your friends?” “Do you know my niece Giuliana?” “Are you in school?”

“Yes, I go to high school in Courmayeur, I am a senior,” I shared.

“Ah sì, your father told me. What are you planning to do with your high school diploma? You don’t really need it to run your mother’s store.”

That was my opening. “I am planning to go to college.”
A gasp. “Oh?” He was shocked!

“Yes, my father told me I could come to you for help. He forgot to leave the 50,000 lire I need to enroll at the university. I need it for tomorrow because my principal is driving me and some classmates to the university for a campus visit. My parents left and promised to leave me the money, but they didn’t, and I—” Tears welled up.

Signor Caridi’s demeanor changed. He softened, smiled, and assured me he would help. He opened his wallet and handed me a 50,000 lire bill.

And that’s how I became the first in my family to attend university. Signor Caridi launched my incredible and fulfilling educational journey. I completed my undergraduate and master’s degrees in France, and later, a second master’s and a Ph.D. at WSU.

That summer, like every summer until graduation, I worked in my mother’s store from 7 am to 8 pm, June to September. My mother often remarked that I didn’t need a college degree to work in the store. But I persevered. When fall came, I prepared for my dorm room and classes, though my fears and insecurities began to surface. I confided these at the dinner table, and despite seeming

indifferent, my parents started expressing pride that I would be the first in the family to attend college.

At the university, I felt supported and at home. My advisor was helpful and genuinely interested in my success. It was easy to talk to professors and classmates with whom I shared much in common. My determination had served me well. I also came to understand that my parents, deep down, were supportive in their own way. They, too, were afraid of the unknown, of what an advanced education entailed. Ultimately, they were proud to see me graduate, from my B.A. to my Ph.D. and to find a fulfilling and cherished career as a university professor.

Supports for First Gen Students with Disabilities

by Hala Alazzawi

There are a wide range of considerations to be made when supporting first generation students with disabilities. For most of these students navigating campus life on their own can feel daunting, particularly in the first years of their academic journeys in higher education. To empower first gen students with disabilities, faculty may direct them to the disability services on campus in order for them to learn more about advocating for academic accommodations. While students may feel hesitant to request accommodations at first, faculty and staff can empower students to seek support by including first gen resources in their syllabi and implementing universal design policies in their coursework and expectations. Universal design policies are focused on meeting the learning needs of all students.

The research I conducted on universal design included policies such as implementing grace periods with assignment due dates, avoiding ambiguity in assignments and allowing students to evaluate the courses periodically to assess the effectiveness of instructors' implementation of these methods. These practices can also advance the success of first gen students with disabilities and reduce any overwhelm they may be experiencing in class.

From an intersectional perspective, first generation students who also come from immigrant backgrounds may find it difficult to assimilate to campus life in the US while also meeting their family's cultural needs and expectations. For example, students with disabilities who do not drive may need time to procure transportation to attend a support group after class. For a concerned parent, providing details about a particular support group in their first language can be helpful to addressing the family's concerns while reducing the onus of translation on the

student. Additionally, immigrant families may need their child to work outside the home due to financial constraints. This may reduce the time a first generation student may have to join support groups on campus. Therefore, the availability of information on financial aid assistance and scholarships in different languages can allow immigrant families to learn more about financial assistance and resources that can help reduce both financial and cultural disparities for students and their families.

First gen support groups for students from various cultural backgrounds can help students build a sense of community, especially when disability justice is addressed in these groups. This sense of community can empower all students to advocate for themselves. In this way, first gen students with disabilities will feel less isolated while also balancing familial expectations as well. The collaboration of various offices on campus such as the DEI and disability services Offices as well as support from faculty and staff can propel first generation students with disabilities towards success.

FIRST GEN BINGO

Balancing work and school	Know a faculty member that is also First Gen	Spend time at Mardigian Library	Used library database	Made new friends
I'm Broke!	Had to figure out FAFSA on your own!	Changed your major	Bombed a test	Used Writing or Math Learning Center
Cried over school work	Laughed at a professors joke	Felt pressure to excel & preform in your academics	Joined a club	Took a foundations course
Attended Office Hours	Joined FGSO	Hard for family to understand experiences	Comfortable speaking in class!	Feel like you are making your family proud
Forgot a deadline	Found YOUR study spot!	Felt like an imposter	Aced a test	Still looking for the castle on campus

Associate Professor Nick Iannarino and English Major Madelyn Gatteri recently worked together on a research project for UM-Dearborn's Summer Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE). The title of their project is "Seriously Funny: The role of humor in illness narratives." Both Iannarino and Gatteri are first generation college students, and the *Wolverzine* talked to them about their experience of undergraduate research and their own journeys as First Gen students.

Wolverzine: Tell me about the project you worked on together.

Nicholas Iannarino: My M.A. thesis was on how comedians told humorous stories about near-death experiences, usually around health issues. One of the stories I read was by Julia Sweeney, who was on Saturday Night Live in the early 1990s. Her memoir was about how her brother was dying of brain cancer while at the same time she was diagnosed with ovarian and uterine cancer. It was really funny in places, and I was curious about how people can tell funny stories about really serious things. The question for us was whether humor serves to make these stories more relatable, whether it serves to build a bigger community around these illnesses and these experiences.

I also knew that there were two other memoirs written by female comedians about reproductive cancers. Probably the most notable one was Gilda Radner. And then Fran Drescher from *The Nanny* had a had a memoir about uterine cancer. And so I was interested in expanding on what I had already found with the Sweeney project to look at how these forms of humor were comparable or differed across these different experiences. Maybe Madeleine could talk a little about what her experience was like reading the books

Madelyn Gatteri: Something else that we looked a little bit more closely at was different types of humor, and more specifically, irony and absurdism, because those seemed to be what these comedians use to not only make sense of their experiences, but also boil down their experiences to make it more palatable for their readers and for themselves. It really kind of opens up the audience a little bit more

from just other people who've had these cancers—or people who know about these cancers—to the general public. (The public) can hear their comedic voice, but the comedians also have a chance to talk about this very personal and scary experience and raise awareness and advocacy for it.

Something I noticed is that each memoir focused on a different aspect of healing. I know that Julia Sweeney's was more familial; she really stuck to her family and her significant other. Fran Drescher's was about advocacy, and just really fighting to figure out what's wrong if you feel something's wrong. And then Radner's was a lot about outreach and community support. And she talked a lot about how important it was to find people in similar experiences because it's healing.

Madelyn: This project was also kind of personally meaningful to me because I lost my grandma to breast cancer in the middle of Winter 2023. Had she been able to communicate about her cancer a little bit more, and felt more comfortable communicating about it, I think she might have lived a little bit longer because a lot of that she kept to herself. And her death definitely affected my academic performance for a while—it felt a lot harder to see the light at the end of the tunnel. There's been multiple points throughout my college career where I've considered just dropping out, because that's what everybody did before me, and that was definitely one of those moments where that grief just really kind of—I felt buried, and it was hard to kind of dig myself out, but I'm glad I did, because I wouldn't be here.

Wolverzine: *Speaking of the value of making personal stories heard, though you obviously come from different generations and different backgrounds, you are both First Gen college students. Did you know previously that you were both First Gen?*

Madelyn: I was not aware that we were both First Gen students. But learning that is really cool, because a lot of the faculty members that I look up to, I'm finding out, are first generation students. So these

people that I respect and admire, they come from a similar first generation background that I do. And knowing this and seeing where you guys have gone, it makes my career goals a lot less daunting. And it's just even more inspiring and motivating to know that we come from this same background.

Nick: I didn't know Madelyn was First Gen either when we started the project. In fact, I didn't even know the term First Gen until I was a PhD student. I remember my parents feeling very uncertain about how to do FAFSA, for example. I was the guinea pig child in a lot of ways. I picked a college that was very similar to my high school culturally. I feel like my parents were not a primary source for information, but they were still incredibly supportive during the process. Luckily I also had professors who were able to shepherd me through the process, and especially getting into grad school. If I wasn't performing decently in my studies, I don't think I would have known much about going to grad school and getting a research or a teaching assistantship or things like that. And so I think one of my favorite things now is just helping students figure out what they want to do after school, whether that's more school or looking for a job.

Madelyn: Being a first-generation student was something that I used to my advantage in high school, but I was a COVID grad, so the plans I really had in place fell through, so it became less of a focal point. I ended up going to community college and I didn't really feel important. It was when I got to my sophomore year and beyond where I really kind of felt helpless because I was choosing a degree that nobody in my family knew anything about. My mom has an associate's degree, but she never finished the four-year degree. She's a respiratory therapist, so she knows nothing about the English major. My Dad knows nothing about English. So it was really confusing, trying to figure out how I could turn this into a career.

Wolverzine: What do you know now about being First Gen that you wish you knew going into college? What advice would you give to incoming first generation students.

Madelyn: I began college as an art major. I did that for a year before I got sick of it. I probably changed my major like three times. So my biggest piece of advice—just to save money, time, and headaches—is maybe go in undecided. And then, as you go through, figure out what you like, figure out what you want to do, and then commit to that major. Don't force yourself into something that you know you won't enjoy. Everybody was suggesting teaching, so I changed my major to teaching, and I hated the classes I was in. I feel like if you don't enjoy what you're going to school for, you're not going to give it your all. If you hate what you're doing, what's the point of doing it? And so just following your own compass, I guess, and giving yourself some grace. Because yes, it is nice to finish college within that four-year time span. But you have all the time in the world. It's not a race.

Nick: My initial thought was to push beyond your comfort zone. But I remember thinking it's so easy in retrospect to be critical of decisions we made when we were 18. It's easy to criticize what I feel are somewhat safe choices now, but I was plenty past my comfort zone then. I didn't have a clear example in my life to show me that moving away from home and succeeding academically and socially in college was doable and attainable. And so I did the best I could with the information I had.

Wolverzine: **Madeline, I saw you nodding your head a couple of times related to college and comfort zones.**

Madeline: At first it was really hard because I was a very high achiever in high school. I graduated with a 3.9. And so, from going to Central Michigan (I had originally planned to go to Central before COVID) with a scholarship to going to community college with nothing, it was a really hard adjustment. But I think that because I made that choice, I was actually able to finish and it gave me the chance to really learn about myself and figure out what I wanted to do.

And then coming to U of M, you know it's right. I was never a big “move away” kind of person. I like being close to home. But this was

far enough away to where I could be exposed to new cultures and new perspectives, because I grew up Downriver. So there's not really much going on down there.

Wolverzine: We talked a bit about how our parents lacked certain experiences that perhaps put us at a disadvantage when we started college. At the same time, one thing that has really become clear in putting these First Gen stories together is that non-college educated parents have a heck of a lot to offer too! A lot of “non-college” or “working class” jobs require elements of problem solving, intuition, hard work, attention to detail, and different ways of seeing things that are immensely valuable even if the skills are put to different uses. Can you tell us about how your own parent’s perspective on work and career helped you achieve success in college?

Nick: Absolutely. My dad took over the family pizza place that my grandpa started in, I think, 1959. And so my dad picked it up basically the day he graduated high school. My grandpa started to phase out and retire and my dad kept it up at a really high standard. He didn't offer a lot of tangible advice about college, but just what I saw from him, and the level of attention to detail, no matter how he was feeling or how much he wanted to do it or not, he still kept that place running at an extremely high level and having extremely high standards. And, you know, he's kind of like me—that level of effort can be kind of consuming in some ways. My mom also worked. She's a registered nurse. Back then you only had to have a nursing certificate, or a nursing diploma, not a college education like you do now. From her I learned more of the self-care and the work-life balance.

Madelyn: So I grew up in a blended family. My mom divorced when I was four, remarried when I was seven. My parents were both about hard work because both of them came from their previous marriages with debt. And so that was their primary focus, was paying down that debt, but also supporting my two sisters and a stepbrother. You know, they were bringing together their two separate lives, four kids under the same roof. Both of my parents were very big on hard work. It was

always all or nothing. Everything that they had us do, they wanted us to perform at 100 percent effort. So that kind of led me to being pushed a lot in school, which is probably why I was such a high achiever and why I'm so bright because my mom really advocated for giving me the resources I needed to really build my academic performance.

My dad, we're not 100% sure, he has either dyslexia or dysgraphia, so he didn't perform well in school. So that was a big push for him, too, that he didn't have those opportunities that we had. So both of them really gave it a big push for at least one of us to finish school. So the idea of giving it my all and going 100%, I made that promise to myself and my parents, and I feel like that's really been the driving factor behind me actually finishing. My siblings make good money doing things that don't need a college degree. My mom got an associate's degree, and she's been a respiratory therapist for almost 30 years. So I've grown up knowing that I don't need this degree, and really I could do a lot without it. But just the idea of giving it my all and following my dreams, that's really been what's inspired me to keep going and continue.

My Education Superhero

By: Lewa Qayed

Superhero Name: Our Big Brother

Origin Story:

In a family of eight, the oldest sibling took on the role of a hero from the very start. He was the first in the family to attend college, taking on the challenge not just for himself but for all his siblings. His late-night study sessions and dedication to learning were fueled by his desire to create a path for his family to follow. One night, as he helped his younger siblings with their homework, his true powers emerged: the ability to absorb knowledge instantly and share it in a way that anyone could understand. Our Big Brother was born, a hero whose mission is to guide, protect, and uplift his family.

Appearance and Costume:

Our Big Brother proudly wears a blue graduation cap with a golden tassel, symbolizing his journey and commitment to education. The large "B" on his chest stands for "Brother," reminding everyone of his strength, wisdom, and love for his siblings. Dressed in calming blue, his costume represents his role as a steady and supportive figure. In one hand, he holds a chemistry book to symbolize his knowledge, and in the other, a stack of assignments, showing the hard work he embraces. His glasses and curly hair add a familiar, comforting touch, making him both wise and approachable.

Superpowers:

Our Big Brother's main power, Infinite Insight, lets him instantly understand and teach any subject, making him a trusted guide for his siblings and friends. His Focus Field creates a distraction-free zone that helps everyone stay on track, perfect for study sessions. With his Motivation Pulse, he radiates confidence and positivity. He can inspire those around him, giving them the boost of confidence they need to push forward. As Our Big Brother, he is not just a superhero; he is family, guiding his loved ones toward their dreams.



A Lucky Buck

By Maureen Linker

My journey from the wild, wacky streets of Brooklyn in the 1980s and 90s to the Administration Building at the University of Michigan-Dearborn in 2024 is a story of discovery, mentorship, and the transformative power of education. As a first-generation college student, my path was neither linear nor easy. It was paved with the sacrifices of my immigrant family, the strength of my mother who had seen it all and didn't flinch, and the grit of my Brooklyn bar owning father, combined with the unwavering encouragement of mentors who saw potential in me even as I doubted myself along the way.

Growing up in a tight-knit working class neighborhood in Brooklyn, my life was anything but glamorous, but it was complex, loving, and in many ways, empowering. My grandparents had traveled across the Atlantic from Ireland and Germany with very little except the hopes for a better life. My father worked long hours as a produce manager at a local grocery store with the goal of one day buying a bar with his brother. They realized their dream when they opened up "The Lucky Buck" (a reference to the first dollar they saved for this enterprise) a neighborhood bar where truck drivers, secretaries, factory workers, and yes, whole families, could come for a cold one, a coke or a beer, a burger and shoot some pool or play the juke box. My mother meanwhile spent most days at home in our apartment

raising me and my brothers, “six kids in five rooms” they always joked, where every piece of furniture seemed to pull out to a bed except, as my dad would say, “the toilet!” My parents’ aspirations for me were simple yet profound: yes they wanted me to have opportunities they never had but they also wanted me to retain the values of family, community, and humility. More than anything else they wanted me to watch out for the “phonies” the big talkers, the arrogant, self-centered people (as a kid that read as “rich” people) who lacked humor, intelligence, or empathy . Despite our financial constraints and some cultural barriers, my family instilled in me the importance of education, integrity, and hard work.

My academic journey began at Brooklyn College, one of the jewels in the City University of New York system. The federal grants I received were a lifeline, making higher education feasible for my family. At Brooklyn College, I found a community of like-minded individuals—many of whom were also first-generation students—each navigating the complexities of college life with a shared sense of purpose and camaraderie. There were students who had just graduated from Yeshiva, ready to argue points in class with gusto and good will. There were sons and daughters of Italian, Haitian, Greek, Polish, and Puerto Rican families and students whose families had been in Brooklyn for generations. There was art, music, poetry (Allan Ginsburg, one of the world’s most influential “Beat” poets was a professor of mine),

science, history, politics, all buzzing around every building and at every table in the cafeteria. But most of all there was for me, philosophy.

My passion for philosophy was ignited in a classroom that was both diverse and intellectually stimulating. But it was Dr. Jonathan Adler, my first philosophy professor who was himself a first-generation college graduate, who changed the trajectory of my life. Dr. Adler recognized a potential in me for logical reasoning but most of all, he celebrated and valued my persistent interrogation of what makes life meaningful. He became an intellectual mentor, providing guidance, support, and the occasional tough love that I needed to thrive in my studies.

"Ms. Linker," he once told me during office hours, "you have a mind that can contribute significantly to philosophical discourse. It just needs to be combined with a significant amount of self-discipline. Don't let your doubts hold you back from doing either." His words resonated deeply, and for the first time, I considered a future I had never deemed possible – a Ph.D. program.

Dr. Adler encouraged me to attend lectures and events at Columbia University and NYU, exposing me to rigorous academic environments beyond the confines of Brooklyn College. Although I often felt the grip of imposter syndrome, questioning my place among the ivy-covered

walls and polished academics, these experiences broadened my horizons and sharpened my resolve. Eventually, when I framed an intelligent question during a Q&A session, or provided clarification during a public discussion, I felt no more scared than when I steadied myself in an argument with my four older brothers or stood up to some street bully in my Brooklyn neighborhood.

Despite the challenges, including the grind of working multiple part-time jobs to make ends meet, I completed my undergraduate degree with honors. With Dr. Adler's guidance and letters of recommendation, I applied to several Ph.D. programs and was accepted to the City of New York Graduate Center, a nationally recognized philosophy program that offered full funding.

After years of study, teaching assignments, and countless hours in the library, I earned my doctorate in philosophy. My academic pursuits took me through various institutions, but it was the offer from the University of Michigan-Dearborn that felt like destiny.

The sense of familiarity and community I found among the many first-generation college student commuters at Dearborn reminded me of my own journey. Here, I saw reflections of my younger self—students brimming with potential but often doubting their place in academia. I was determined to make a significant impact by providing the same mentorship and encouragement that

I had once received.

Today, I am now a “senior” professor and administrator at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. I have moved from the classroom to the administration building with the hope of “turning a bigger gear” toward the truly transformative power of education. I take so much pride in the mentoring of first-generation students I did in my more than 20 years in the classroom, guiding students through the maze of academia, and helping them navigate the complexities of their educational journeys.

My story really is a testament to the power of community, mentorship, and resilience. It's a narrative that underscores the importance of institutional support systems like those provided by the City University of New York. My journey from Brooklyn to Dearborn is not just my own; it is a shared experience, one that I continue to honor by looking back and giving forward to the next generation of scholars.



Learning to Ask: Overcoming Isolation as a First-Generation Student

By Heba Sayed

Navigating college—and life in general—can be incredibly lonely, especially as a first-generation student. Without family or friends who truly understood the college experience, adapting to this new world often felt like a stressful journey, one I had to tackle alone. In high school, I hardly knew where to start with college applications, and figuring things out independently was overwhelming. Each decision—from choosing schools to filling out financial aid forms stressful, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't jealous of my classmates who had people in their lives guiding them through it all.

When I finally entered college, I assumed that getting good grades and attending class would be enough to succeed. I didn't realize that college requires much more, especially as a software engineering major. Beyond academic performance, I should have been networking, joining clubs, building programming projects, and creating a strong foundation for my future career. I look back now at my first two years and realize how unaware I was of the “unwritten rules” of college life, particularly in such a competitive field. A part of me wishes I had someone to warn about these things—maybe I would be in a different place today.

Through all of this, I knew I was struggling. I also knew that if I had sought help, I would have surely found it. But instead of seeking out help, I fell into a pattern of extreme self-reliance. I became so hyper-independent that asking for help felt almost impossible, even when I knew it would benefit me. Part of me

believed I needed to figure things out on my own. Perhaps a part of me even felt embarrassed to admit how lost I felt or how inexperienced I was. I saw classmates who seemed to know the “rules” and felt like I was behind them simply because I was a first-generation student.

Recognizing that my hyper-independent mindset was holding me back, I decided to take small but meaningful steps to break free from this isolation. I began attending office hours, meeting with my advisor, joining clubs, and making new friends. I gradually became more open about my struggles and started seeking advice from others. While these changes felt uncomfortable—and sometimes still do—they have been crucial in my growth.

Even now, I occasionally catch myself reverting to the belief that I don’t need anyone’s help, but I’ve come to understand that this mindset only hinders my progress. Being a first-generation student can often feel isolating, yet I’ve realized that asking for support is not a weakness—it’s a strength. No one succeeds entirely on their own, and seeking guidance is a vital part of learning and growing. It’s okay to be vulnerable, to acknowledge when you’re struggling, and to ask for help—because that’s how we grow and move forward.

Marty Hershock
Professor of History

Finally, the application was ready to submit. I was really applying to the History PhD program at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. I was really doing this!

My path to this day had been a long and circuitous one. As the first member of my working-class Detroit family to attend college (my mother was from a family of seventeen children and my father's parents had immigrated to the United States from what became Poland early in the 20th century) I had struggled to navigate the vagaries and complexities of my undergraduate studies at UM-Dearborn. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined continuing my education at the graduate level (in fact, I was not even cognizant of what graduate education was) when I began my undergraduate career. That I had made it to UM-Dearborn was, actually, a bit of a miracle itself. Certainly, my parents and other members of my family knew about the existence of colleges (if only minimally, as a place where football was played) but attending university had never been presented as more than something to think about throughout my middle and high school years. I can honestly say that I did not know anyone (except for my family doctor) who had attended college. That changed when a young couple bought the house next door to ours. Mr. C was a University of Michigan trained accountant working at Ford. He was young, he liked to play football, baseball, and basketball with the neighborhood kids, and he was the first college graduate that I really came to know on a personal basis. It wasn't long before he began taking my brother and I to sporting events in Ann Arbor. These trips always included time strolling around the Ann Arbor campus. I loved everything about those trips, and it was because of

them that I started to think that maybe college was something I could consider. I wasn't enthralled by the reality of what going to university was (as I had no clue) but was in love with the idea of the university.

The idea of college was one thing, putting myself in a position to gain admission and to actually succeed in my studies was altogether another. My high school—Redford Union, or RU High? as it was more commonly known—was not exactly known for its rigorous college preparatory curriculum or university preparation advising. Far more of my friends enrolled in shop classes than AP History or English and almost all of them intended to follow a well-worn path passed on from father to son for generations into area's auto plants or various trades. That's just how one did things. It had worked for our parents and grandparents why would we consider anything different? And so I set out to try to decipher the mysterious world of college. With only the vaguest sense of what I probably should take to gain admission to a university (I followed the lead of the smart kids except in math where I struggled to keep pace even with my peers in the middle of the bell curve). I was not a stellar student. I did not really understand how to study. I did not come from a world where academic success was highly valued (on the contrary, it made one different and thus "weird") and I was far more interested in my television shows and sports than the material presented to me at school. Still, I somehow managed decent grades; generally, not A work—except in history—but good solid Bs and B+s. Somehow, I never really considered that this unspectacular academic record might not get me into UM-Ann Arbor. I wanted to go there and I pretty much thought that, because I wasn't an abysmal failure in the classroom, that would be enough. Surprise, surprise, it was nowhere near enough and I did not

gain admission to UM-Ann Arbor. Fortunately for me, because I had no idea that UM-Ann Arbor and UM-Dearborn were separate entities (other than requiring different applications) I had also applied to UM-D where I was admitted. I now realize how fortunate I am to have had my cards fall into place in just this way.

Working full time as I did, I knew that I would have to be careful about taking on too many courses in any given semester. I did know that there were some general education courses that I needed to take as this had been explained to me at orientation and so I plunged in and signed up for some of those. COMP was a requirement, so I took that. I had also been urged to take a particular MATH class by the person I spoke with at orientation and so I signed up for it. Little did I know that the MATH course that I was now enrolled in and paying for (along with a Physical Fitness course I was taking—surely you must need a gym class at some point), counted for nothing toward my actual degree requirements. I'd learn this lesson much later. My grades were mediocre, and I drifted through my courses without any real direction. I had no idea what I wanted to major in but, given that Mr. C had a nice life, I determined that maybe accounting or business was the way for me to go. I looked into that and learned that there were some specific courses that I needed to take, and that only after taking these could I apply for admission to the School of Management (Huh? Wasn't I already a student at the university?). To qualify I had to take a series of courses ranging from Calculus and Economics, Accounting and Business Computing and to earn at least a B in them. Let's do this! Except, I hated it; every bit of it. I found the courses uninteresting and (no offense to my COB peers) lacking a human element. Needless to say, my grades reflected my lack of interest—yes, I still have that D+ on my

transcript along with a slew of Cs and C-s. Fortunately, however (and I mean this as I was seriously considering leaving the university), I had also enrolled in an elective history course that I had fallen in love with. I couldn't wait to attend that class and to engage with the material that we were studying and the Professor—Donald Proctor—quickly began to complement my work and encourage my interest in the subject. Doctor Proctor's impassioned storytelling and the links he traced between varied historical threads, along with his relaxed and impertinent classroom persona, drew me in. I was hooked and I eagerly became (in spite of my family's incessant refrain of "what are you going to do with a history degree?") a history major.

It was while studying history and working with the kind, thoughtful, encouraging and accessible history faculty (they really cared about me and my success) that the idea of graduate school first cropped up when I asked one of these faculty members "what would I need to do to become a history professor like you?" My understanding of their work was minimal but the idea of being able to share my love of history with others and to help guide students along their educational path, the way that I'd been guided, seemed like a dream job. To my surprise, as I never considered myself smart by any measure, my faculty mentors strongly encouraged me along this path and so, I began to think about earning a PhD (though I really had no clear understanding of what this entailed other than further study) in history and I began searching for potential programs to apply to. While I eagerly spoke to them about which programs to consider and about taking the GRE (Graduate Record Examination—I hate standardized tests) I did not think to ask about the actual application process, nor did anyone think to bring the topic up with me.

And so we've come full circle back to my application. I had done it! The application was in the mail and all I needed to do now was wait anxiously for an admissions decision. That wait time turned out to be crushingly short for me. Within a week of the application deadline, I received from Ann Arbor a postcard (not even a letter) rejecting my application. I was stunned. Not knowing what to do I turned back to my faculty mentors and embarrassingly shared the outcome. As they queried me about my application it became crystal clear that I had done virtually everything wrong. I doomed myself from the get-go. Not only was my GRE score on the low end of what Ann Arbor liked to see but I had: 1) written a truly sophomoric and unprofessional statement of purposes ("Standing on the battlefield at Gettysburg I realized how much I loved history"—today's me cringes when I read it); 2) I did not sign the waivers on my requested letters of application ("It would be nice to read what my letter writers have to say about me"); AND, 3) at least one of those letters was written by my girlfriend's (and soon to be wife's) mother ("she knows me pretty well"). What an unmitigated disaster. No wonder I got the postcard treatment! Now what?

Rather than being ashamed of me, the faculty that I had come to know, trust, and dare I say love, rallied around me. To boost my GRE score before applying again, one faculty member recommended a Stanley Kaplan preparation course (he even paid for it for me); another coached me on my statement, and a third helped me to rethink my approach to the letters. They also steered me in the direction of Wayne State University's history MA program as an opportunity to further build my skills and as a stepping stone to another application to Ann Arbor. In the end, this path eventually

worked—another failed application before a third and finally successful one). The rest, to use the obvious pun, is history.

Looking back on this story with years of experience and perspective now in hand, I recognize the many obstacles and challenges that my being a first-generation college posed for me: the lack of experienced friends and family to turn to for guidance; the constant questions-- “who did I think I was?” “who do you think you’re fooling?” “you’re doing what?” “how do I do this?”; the many signals I received suggesting that maybe I didn’t belong (the professor who took great glee in condescendingly correcting my incorrect pronunciation of the word paradigm—sorry, I wouldn’t have known a paradigm then if it had hit me over the head); the fear of asking questions (“you should know how to do this—look it up”) and looking stupid; the fear of failure; my family’s turning away from me as they felt that I’d no longer be interested in their mundane lives and activities; etc. All of these things and so many more made my educational path more difficult but they also made it incredibly rewarding. The first gen experience challenged me and forced me to be adaptable, to be empathetic and patient, and to be persistent. I’m well past that postcard now (though I still have it) and have accomplished many more things than I ever imagined (becoming a Dean? I didn’t even know what a Dean was when I started college) possible. I consider myself the luckiest person alive to have been able to return to my alma mater to practice the profession that I was first introduced to on this campus and to continue to work with students whose lives (albeit unfolding at a different historical epoch) mirror my own in so many ways!

A Guide to Navigate a First Gen Students Calendar

Wisteria - Personal Commitments

- First Gen Students can often run out of time for themselves & their relationships if they do not block it off.

Banana - University Commitments

- If a First Gen student is lucky they may have "free time" to commit to being involved on campus.
- These commitments can range from attending events, leading an organization, conducting research, and more!
- University commitments are rarely paid positions which limits the ability of First Gens to actually have them.

Peacock - Class 2

- Intro to Health Policy - 3 credits
- Every Monday from 6pm to 8:45pm

Sage - Class 3

- Healthcare Administration - 3 credits
- Online Asynchronous

Flamingo - Class 5

- Gender, Sexualities, & Bodies - 4 Credits
- Every Tuesday from 2pm to 3:45pm

Grape - Paid Work

- First Gen Students often have to work 1 or more jobs (frequently at or over 40 hours a week) in order to pay bills & attend university
- University jobs are not usually a viable option for First Gen students either as on campus jobs come with hour & pay caps.

Tomato - Due Dates

- First Gen Students like any other student can take any range of credit hours (up to 18) which can impact the amount of work they have due in any given week or month.

Lavender - Class 1

- Intro to Public Health - 3 Credits
- Online Asynchronous

Tangerine - Class 4

- Psychology Internship - 4 Credits
- Every Wednesday from 12pm to 1:45pm
- Onsite internship is required with this course. That was categorized in yellow.

First Gen Students Deserve Support

2:39

5G 80



- Work: 25 hours per week
- 17 Credit hours with A's in all 5 classes
- Roughly 20 Research hours per Week

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	Work	LGBTQ his	Work meet	FGSO Gen	Meeting W	Work
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Superhero Name: The Wisdom Weaver
By Zahraa Rida

Origin Story: The Wisdom Weaver, also known as “Mama,” was once a humble but fierce advocate for her children’s education, always helping them with homework and teaching them life lessons beyond the classroom. One evening, after an exhausting day of balancing work, family, and studies, she was reading a bedtime story when a mysterious comet flashed across the night sky. That flash of light granted her incredible powers, transforming her into the Wisdom Weaver, a superhero dedicated to inspiring a love of learning and guiding young minds through the toughest academic challenges.

Appearance:

The Wisdom Weaver’s costume is a vibrant blend of blues and greens, representing calm wisdom and nurturing energy. She wears a cape woven with symbols of knowledge, from ancient scripts to modern equations. Her belt is lined with tokens like mini chalkboards, rulers, and flashcards. She carries a “Bag of Brilliance,” a magical pouch that holds everything from study guides to quick snacks to keep her “students” energized and focused.

Superpowers:

The Wisdom Weaver’s primary superpower is “Instant Understanding,” allowing her to simplify even the toughest concepts and make them relatable. She also has a “Calming Cloak,” which soothes anxiety and boosts confidence whenever her children are stressed or nervous about tests. Her special skill, “Memory Mender,” helps with recall during quizzes and exams. With these powers, the

Wisdom Weaver continues to support her family's education with love, patience, and wisdom beyond words.



Keyword First Gen

William DeGenaro
and Michael T. MacDonald
Professors of Composition
and Rhetoric at UM-Dearborn

There is no single articulation of what *we talk about when we talk about* first-gen students. There is also no single way that colleges and universities reach out to this population. Some institutions create student life programs, some build academic support structures, some do both, and some pay only lip service, promoting their campus as first-gen friendly without providing support for students who might be multiple-marginalized and are the first in their family to go to college.

No single definition of the term “first-gen” exists. It usually indicates that a student is the first in their immediate family to attend a four-year college or university, the first to attend any college, or a student whose parents attended college but did not complete a four-year degree (to name the most common definitions). The fact that the term “first-gen” is contested reflects the diversity of rhetorics surrounding these students in higher education.

For a more in-depth analysis of “first-gen” as a keyword for higher education, see our book chapter:

“A Keyword Analysis of Websites That Support First-Generation Students” by William DeGenaro and Michael T. MacDonald, in *Beyond Fitting In: Rethinking First-Generation Writing and Literacy Education*, edited by Kelly Ritter, 2023, p. 27.

In this chapter, we reviewed university websites intended to support first-generation college students. In doing so, we learned a lot about *what we talk about when we talk about* first-gen students. As professors at UM-Dearborn, we also saw how the label “first-gen” could not be pinned down to one simple interpretation.

Bill: Confession - I am not a first-gen college student. My dad was an elementary school teacher who went to our hometown college, Youngstown State, early in the Baby Boom era, a time when male high school graduates could easily get jobs in Youngstown’s many steel mills making as much as *their* dads, which was more than teachers made. He took a different path, a path that seemed providential when all of Youngstown’s mills closed a few decades later. I grew up in the wake of those steel mill closings and developed a lifelong interest in working-class culture and working-class life. As an academic, much of what I study—including the rhetorical practices of working-class people and the educational methods that best serve working-class communities including first-gen students—has its origins in my dad’s story and my hometown’s story.

Mike: I was a first-generation college student who grew up in a very small, rural town in New Hampshire. What was unique about my experience was that unlike some stories of first-gen students in which parents are skeptical about higher education, mine *insisted* that I go to college so that I could have more opportunities, more of a chance to find a job that would be personally fulfilling. Of course, even as a child I was a nerd and more-or-less liked school so navigating college for me was more of a struggle in terms of financial access. Though, I do remember not liking a course during the first week one semester and being too afraid to drop it because I had never done that before.

In the remainder of this short reflection we wanted to make a few points based on our research:

It would be important for institutions to refrain from seeing “first gen” as only a kind of exploitable label, something to advertise and market, to help with recruitment, while not supporting first-gen students in real, material ways once they are on campus.

We argue that it’s important for institutions to keep several things in mind. The term “first gen” is a *useful* demographic and identity marker in the sense that although first-gen college students are diverse and varied, they often have shared experiences and perspectives.

We also urge institutions to think of “first-gen” in its intersectionality (to borrow Kimberlé Crenshaw’s important concept). First-gen students always embody multiple

identities, apply to college for a wide variety of reasons, and have had access (or not) to all different kinds of resources, while all sharing the experience of not having a legacy of higher education in their families.



Primera Generación de España...? Aprovecha la oportunidad! (. . . seize the opportunity!)

By Jorge Gonzalez del Pozo
Professor of Spanish

Soy estudiante de primera generación, mis padres no pudieron terminar ni siquiera la primaria. Hace unos años vinieron a visitarme y coincidió con que yo daba el discurso de los profesores en la ceremonia de graduación. Nunca se me olvidará la mirada de mi madre ni su expresión tan orgullosa. Más allá de las emociones, yo no tengo hijos, pero todos mis sobrinos y sobrinas han podido ir a la universidad y han terminado estudios en enfermería, medicina y fisioterapia. El salto generacional es asombrosamente claro, y todo porque mis hermanos y yo fuimos la primera generación en mi familia que pudimos estudiar en la universidad. No puedo enfatizar suficientemente el tremendo cambio positivo en mi vida que supuso acceder a la universidad. Se ha abierto un mundo de oportunidades ilimitadas, literalmente. Les cuento esta historia a mis estudiantes siempre que puedo; ellos asumen que provengo de un entorno "educado", pero nada más lejos de la realidad, y cuando escuchan mi historia se dan cuenta del potencial de crecimiento que ofrece la vida universitaria.

I was first generation student in my home, my parents couldn't finish even primary school. They came once to see visit me and I happened to be giving the speech from the faculty body at a graduation ceremony, I will never forget my mother's eyes, expression and pride. Beyond emotions, I don't have kids but my nieces and nephews are all going to university finishing degrees in nursing, medical school and physical therapy. The generation leap is clear and astonishing, all because my siblings and I were first gen. college students. I

cannot express the positive difference that going to college made in my life, it opened a world of opportunities with no end/limit in sight, literally. I tell my students this all the time; they assume I come from an "educated" family, but they realize the potential growth through college that we have when I share my story.

Was Higher Education Worth It? By Mazen Zeidan

I remember a time when I was younger when college education was seen as almost being essential to finding a great job. If you got a college degree, you were basically all set to get a good job and be successful. Yet over the years, I've noticed things change in the sense that it's not uncommon for someone to go to college and get a degree and yet still have trouble finding work. In fact, I've noticed a large push from people saying that going to college is a waste of time. That anything you want to learn, you can just learn by going to the internet or on YouTube. And that it's too expensive, and that if you go, you're subjecting yourself to years of debt. All of these sentiments have been coming into mind lately as I'm on track to finish my master's degree in May of next year. I don't know what job I will get when I graduate. I don't know what my life will be like once I'm finished with my degree. And I know that the years I've spent in higher education are something I can never get back. Which leads me to the question, was it all worth it? Did I get something out of it? Or did I waste my time?

In terms of just the pure academic knowledge I've gained, I think that most of what I learned I could've probably also have learned on the internet. College certainly wasn't cheap either. Thankfully, my parents supported me financially. But still, this was an expensive investment. That's one side of the perspective, but then there's the other side. I got to meet many interesting people who I never would have met otherwise. I feel like, as a person, I developed a lot, and I do think higher education played a large role in that. I felt that I did get an experience that I couldn't get otherwise. I also know that I've given myself a boost up in the job market. Ultimately, I do think that higher education was worth it and that if I could do it all again, I probably would.

Excerpt from the book *"Burning the Help"* written by
Latesa Rice

The elderly woman burst into tears, then embraced Helen and said, "Thank you. What are you here in the hospital for?"

"My sister just gave birth to my niece!" Helen replied with great joy.

"Oh that's beautiful. How old is your sister?" asked the elderly lady.

"She's 19 years old and she just graduated from Driver's High School. She received a full-ride scholarship to Hidden Valley University. It is one of the best universities for her because it is well known for its medical program and she wants to be a doctor," Helen explained.

"She had so much going for her, and just had a baby? Her life is over! That's so sad," the elderly woman said.

Helen was furious. Nobody talks about her family members like that! With her eyebrows raised and her face twisted into fifty knots, Helen stood up from where she was playing with the children, placed her hand on her hip and said..."

And the story continues once you acquire your copy of the book "Burning the Help".

Now that I have your attention, let's look at this brief excerpt from the book and discuss how it applies to being first gen. Like

Helen who is the eldest sibling, oftentimes those who are First Gen feel responsible for their family and are pulled into a plethora of directions. Like the sister that is mentioned in the above excerpt, some of us may not have made the best choices. And like the elderly lady in the above excerpt, others may make rash assumptions about your potential success based on your current circumstance or the choices that you made in the past.

Despite what others may think or say about you, you define you. You do not have to be a product of your environment. You do not have to succumb to the pressures you face in life. You can and you will rise above every challenge that you face in life. You have already demonstrated that you are a trailblazer based on the statistics.

According to the “National Data Fact Sheets on First-generation College Students and Graduates. As of 2020, 54% of undergraduate students in the United States identified as first-generation, defined as an undergraduate student whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree.” (<https://firstgen.naspa.org/journal-and-research/national-data-fact-sheets-on-first-generation-college-students-and-graduates/553E0FD8-F43B-4C40-99EE52FE842B3FB6>)

As a First Gen student, you are creating a pathway for others in your family, community and those connected to you to follow. Know that you are not alone in this mission and it is ok to seek assistance. We are all better together. As a First gen alumnae of the University of Michigan-Dearborn, the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor and Central Michigan University, I am honored to salute you as you continue to pursue greatness.

Power Within
By Valeria Garcia-Lopez


Valeria Garcia-Lopez is a first-generation student who created this piece of artwork for her ART 210 course which tasked her to create a poster for the Writing Center on campus. She had the following to say about the piece;

“The idea behind this piece was to remind students who visit the Writing Center that no matter what life may throw their way, you can still get through it. We all have our own struggles in life, but that does not mean we should give up. If you feel like you are struggling, please know there are resources available on campus (e.g., CAPS, the Writing Center, etc.). There is nothing wrong with asking for help.”



AUTHOR
**ALICE
WALKER**

THE MOST COMMON WAY PEOPLE GIVE UP THEIR POWER IS BY THINKING THEY DON'T HAVE ANY



What does it mean to be first gen by Autumm Caines

I had no idea that I was a “first generation college student”. Or, for that matter, that there was such a term used to describe a group of people. I was several years into my first full-time professional staff appointment in higher education when I discovered all of this. If I am pressed to describe my work in higher education, in a nutshell, to someone outside of higher ed I usually respond with “I teach teachers about teaching and sometimes about technology” – it is all very meta.

So, there I was working at the teaching center in a small liberal arts university in Central Ohio, pretty early in my career, when somehow I ended up having lunch with someone who worked in Student Services. We had just met and were telling our respective higher ed staff origin stories to one another, when after I finished mine she said:

“That is so cool that you were a first gen student! I’m currently organizing an event to put first gen faculty and staff in conversation with our first gen students. It is kind of like a speed dating format. Would you like to be part of it?”

My response was, “Wait, I’m a what?” “You are working with who?”

She went on to tell me all about this demographic of people who attend college but whose parents never did. How they often don't have those same kind of intuitions about how higher ed institutions work because they didn't grow up hearing stories and getting guidance about college from their parents. She told me that one part of her job was to create programming for these students, help them feel welcome, and figure out barriers that were often just the bureaucratic workflows of the university. These struggles resonated with me and I remembered my own struggles with those workflows.

I decided to participate in that first gen event. It was actually a kick-off meeting for a mentorship program to partner first gen students with first gen faculty and staff. Just like speed dating, first gen students met with first gen faculty/staff and spent a few minutes talking about their experiences before they rotated and moved along for another few minutes with someone new. After each round each person indicates if they felt that their experiences aligned to that person's and if they might be a good mentor/mentee for one another - this happens in private on a little scorecard. Afterward the organizers look at all the scorecards and if two people agreed that they wanted to connect as a mentor/mentee then their contact info was shared with each other.

I learned that even though everyone there was first gen that our experiences varied widely. There were broad

differences in family support and connection. Also, varying supports financially. Some students were fine with the university systems and were navigating those well but were visibly anxious about the academic work and worried about disappointing their families. Others worried about growing away from their family and that college would change them in ways that would no longer allow them to connect. Some had more financial support than others. The list went on and I realized first gen is not one experience.

I know college is not always a transformational experience for everyone but it really was for me. The term first gen helped me to put some of that transformation into context. I found a part of my identity with the term but in many ways it also drew into the light other elements. The fact that I was a non-traditional student and that I was actually a first generation high school graduate provided more context. The first gen term and frame is an important one when we consider the college experience but we also have to keep in mind just how diverse this group can be.

The Brainstormer

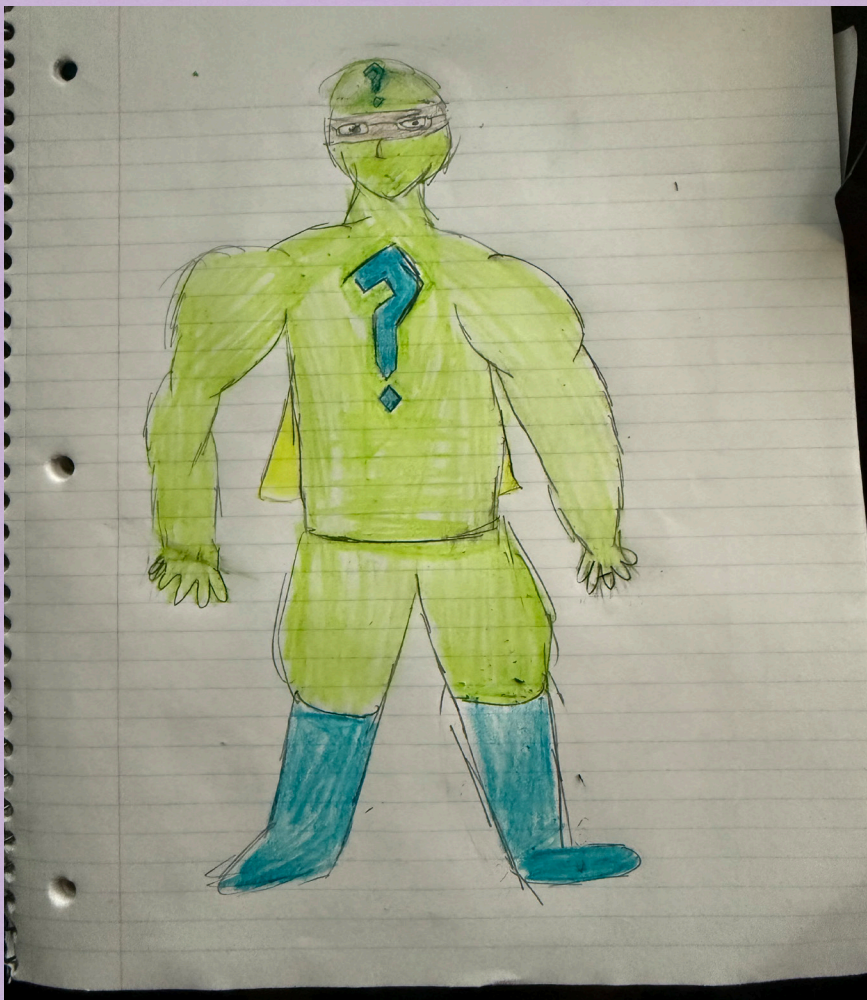
By Rayyan Ateequi

I decided to create the education hero Brainstormer. The Brainstormer is a high school teacher who teaches students the importance of their futures. He emphasizes that everybody only lives once, and his IQ exceeds any other recorded IQ. The Brainstormer is noticed for being the smartest man in history but chooses to be a high school teacher, which baffles many who know his abilities. What most people do not know about the Brainstormer is that although by day he is the world's greatest teacher, by night he is that world's greatest superhero. The Brainstormer helps stop crime and also leads people away from crime.

Some may ask where the Brainstormer got his superhuman mind from, and the answer would be his home planet of Branium. Before the planet's destruction due to being attacked by other species, the planet of Branium was able to send out a few survivors to other areas. One of these would be our world-renowned Brainstormer. The iconic knee-high socks and his shortened yellow cape are both remnants of the planet, and the brainstormer wears them to pay homage. Although it doesn't fit his huge frame at times, the brainstormer wears dress shirts, during his teaching hours, that sometimes go unbuttoned due to his massive muscles. The Brainstormer is able to see through walls, run at Mach 5 speed, and is able to fly as well. The one thing he is most known for is his IQ, both in the classroom and out.

For my superhero, "The Brainstormer", I took quite a bit of inspiration from a teacher I was lucky enough to have back in high school. I was able to create a long-lasting connection with him, and other than learning Math, I was able to converse with him about almost anything. I feel sometimes that as a society we do not understand the importance of teachers and what they do for us students. While I myself am not a first gen student, many of my close friends are. These are the people that I have created a close bond with over the

years, and when they describe their experiences with me, it is often find myself in awe due to their incredible achievements. These first gen students seem to be the most motivated, having a motivation factor stronger than many that surround them. [Statement from student]



First Gen

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A Zine About Students as Partners

Acknowledgements for First Gen Special Issue

“First generation college students” (or often “First Gen”) are typically defined as students whose parents did not complete a four-year degree, making them the first person in their family to experience college. On the UM Dearborn campus, our student group, First Generation Student Organization (FGSO), expands this definition, and defines First Gen as those students who are the first in their family to pursue a four-year degree in the United States.

The organization First Gen Forward estimates that roughly 50% of First Gen students aren’t even aware that they are First Gen until they begin college, making it even more important that colleges and universities reach out and highlight the resources available and connect First Gens with one another.

Because university life is a new experience for families and students, there are expectations and uncertainties that sometimes require a bit of . . . well . . . extra tenacity. We’re happy to bring some of these tales of tenacity to you – tales from fellow students, staff and faculty – all on our campus, all of whom are first generation students and First Gen Wolverines!

Troy Murphy
Associate Professor of Communication
Faculty Co-Editor First-Gen Special Edition

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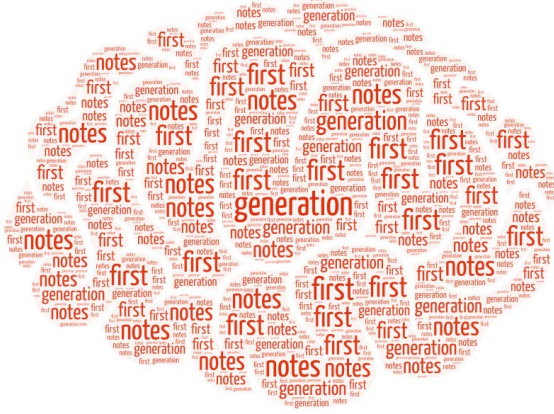
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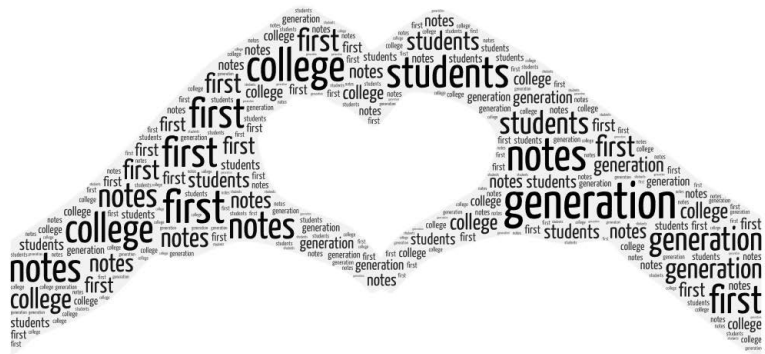
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