

Being A First-Generation Student

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<https://faulibrarydean.wordpress.com/2020/10/21/being-a-first-generation-student/>

What is a first-generation student and why does it matter? [The Center for First-Generation Student Success](#) provides a few definitions, including a federal definition that “first-generation students come from families where their biological parents did not complete a four-year college degree.” While the definitions vary, the reason the term is important is that it is believed that students who enter college without having a parent or other family member who attended college “implies the possibility that a student may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college.”

I am a first-gen college student. My parents had a high-school education. Neither of my brothers went to college, nor did any of my aunts, uncles or cousins (save one who was much older and whom I barely knew). Looking back, I can clearly see that I did lack that “critical cultural capacity” that would have made it easier to be successful in college. I winged the cultural aspects of the college experience a lot. While I did not initially know I was at a disadvantage, I discovered it gradually as my friends and fellow students were suddenly taking advantage of opportunities that I didn’t even know existed –until it was too late for me.

I knew nothing about how college operated. This was also well before the time when most colleges had advisers. In those days, it was expected that you entered as a first-year student and you progressed through to graduation in exactly four years. Options were not impossible but they were also not widely advertised or encouraged. I signed up for classes that interested me, within the confines of my major requirements, and I worked hard, studied hard, and had some amazing learning opportunities, in and outside of the classroom.

But no one realized or thought about what I might not understand. No one realized, for instance, that I didn’t know anything about study-abroad programs and only learned about them when I noticed that some friends from my language classes were not there with me during my junior year because they were in Costa Rica, Moscow, or Frankfurt. No one knew, for instance, that I had never heard of graduate school and didn’t apply because I only found out about that mysterious next step as friends of mine suddenly announced in their last semester that they had been accepted into a graduate program at Cornell or Harvard or MIT. I was a scholarship student who also worked two to three jobs a semester to pay for the next semester’s tuition so I also didn’t have the time to hang out much in the student union or in clubs and learn about these things in informal conversations. I was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa in my senior year without ever having heard about it before and without much of an idea of what it meant.

Looking back, I am nothing but grateful for the opportunities I had in college. Going to college was a dream that I had without any clear idea of what I wanted to become. I only knew that I was passionate about studying foreign languages and history. I only knew that I never wanted to stop learning. Going to college was essential for me to learn what I was capable of and it enabled me to start to carve my own special place in the world that was different from anything anyone else in my family had done.

As I have moved along in my professional career, I have never lost sight of my experience as a first-gen student at Grinnell College. My experience has motivated me to mentor others and to strive to make sure that the

services we offer in the FAU Libraries are inclusive and supportive of people from all backgrounds. Many times as a first-gen student, I didn't understand what was going on around me but I kept quiet and learned to absorb things without openly asking about them. Because of that experience, I want to make sure that the FAU Libraries can be navigated by anyone without them first having to understand how we do things. I want the FAU Libraries to be welcoming and friendly and for us to be able to meet students' needs, no matter their starting point. I want our students to feel comfortable asking for help and finding that help in lots of different ways.



FAU's [Office of First-Generation Student Success](#) "serves as a referral hub to the various services that exist to inspire and assist first-generation students at Florida Atlantic University, including academic support, advising, financial assistance and scholarships, mentorship, and the "First and Proud" registered student organization." The Libraries work together with this office on a variety of initiatives throughout the year.

The [Council for Opportunity in Education](#) is promoting *First-Generation Celebration Day* on November 8, 2020, by encouraging "colleges and universities to celebrate the success of first-generation college students, faculty, and staff on your campus in any and every way possible." This year, in honor of the national First-Generation Celebration Day, the FAU Libraries are celebrating the faculty and staff of the Libraries who were first-generation college students. We asked FAU Libraries' folks them to contribute a picture from their college graduation and to state, in one sentence, why going to college was important for them. My college graduation picture is above. We hope that our personal stories will encourage today's first-generation students to persevere and to know that there are many of us here who are dedicated to helping them be successful in their academic careers at FAU. To see some of those stories, check out our social media sites, including Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/FAULibraries/posts/10157734844446381>, Twitter, and Instagram.

We have also created a resource guide for First-Generation Students that is available at: <https://library.fau.edu/external-relations/first-generation-books-resources> . We want every first-generation student to know that the FAU Libraries are here to support them on their journey, wherever it may take them!