Being family's first in college is tough

Navigating unfamiliar paths is a special challenge for those who are university trailblazers

BY WILLIAM HAGEMAN
Tribune reporter

Parents, teachers and the media have hammered home the message for decades: To succeed in life, you need an education.

And kids listen. College enrollment has never been higher, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

But as more young people move beyond high school, the unique challenges that often face first-generation college students are becoming more apparent. A 2000 NCES study found a wide gap in the graduation rates between four-year students whose parents earned degrees (69 percent) and those whose parents never went to college (40 percent).

In most circles, a first-generation student is defined as one who had neither parent graduate from a four-year school. Income, race and ethnicity are not factors.

Marcia Hanlon, director of counseling at Aurora University, says that throughout high school, these students get pumped up about college.

"But when they get here, wow, it's different from high school," Hanlon says.

The realization can hit when the student gets that first syllabus.

Confusion, uncertainty, frustration, fear... all the emotions kick in. Then comes the question: Who can I talk to?

For first-generation students, the answer can be elusive. For college — both the campus and the concept — is such unfamiliar territory.

"I kind of see this as an alien landscape," says Rashme Ruston, a member of the first-generation student organization at Aurora University. "It's like being in a new world you've never been in before."

Students often find themselves lost, Ruston, an assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota, says that students are forced to navigate unfamiliar networks.

First-generation students are more likely to be older, to be from lower-income families, to be students of color and have limited access to English," she says. "Even before college, they are in multiple roles. They are supporting their families, they are the first to go to college."

Then get in this new world, you feel you can't go back again. You're an outsider in this new world, but you can't go back to your old world.

This one-foot-in-each-world idea can be a little daunting, though. These students are much more career-oriented, they're in school to get a better job. And Hanlon says that some, especially students from lower-income families, are often more resilient.

"They've had to cope with a lot of difficulties," Hanlon says. "They need to translate that to a campus environment."

Again, though, college administrators often do the wrong thing on their campus.

"So much of the way we frame these students is through a deficiency model," Hanlon says. "The school thinks, "We'll develop remediation courses and support issues."

But it's really about the nature of the experiences these students have had, the things they've done in life: they've managed and negotiated a lot of different environments, work, home, school.

"Think of it as including an insurance form for Grandpa because he doesn't speak English. They're doing things in many cases the parents did, but I don't think they see that as still safe, but as deficiencies."

Some schools, though, are addressing the issue, with freshman orientation sessions that focus on these students, and counselors such as Hanlon trying to head off potential problems.

"They should have a separate orientation for first-generation parents," Hanlon says. "What's their experience like?" Hanlon adds. "It's very hard for them to ask questions of their parents, or to get advice."

"I think what some of these pre-enrollment orientation sessions can do is explain the types of behaviors that can be productive for their students, and not to put demands on their kids," Hanlon says.

"What they're doing is very difficult and they need to support them generally and not add to it," Hanlon says.

First-generation college student Tyler Langen, 22, a junior at Loyola University Chicago, practices being assistant director on a television show during his broadcast news class.

Even your professors don't always speak the same language. Jeff Davis, author of "The First Generation Student Experience" (Stylux), estimates that when he started as an assistant professor of English at Sonoma State University 15 years ago, "half the professors didn't know what the term was."

Many in student support didn't have the same definition in mind.

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Student's plan: Be family's first with degree

BY KAREN ANN CULOTTA
Tribune reporter

Aurora University's Marcia Hanlon says the first syllabus comes as a jolt to many first-generation college students.

"It was so glad we had moved past the awkwardness of a new world, where he was proud and happy for me," said Tyler Langen, 22, a junior at Loyola University Chicago, where he's pursuing a major in broadcast journalism.

"He was always curious and asking questions of me about my experience," said Langen. "He was always supportive of my journey and of my family."

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