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Being the “First”: A Narrative Inquiry into the Funds of Knowledge of First Generation College Students in Teacher Education

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KANSAS STATE | College of Education
UNIVERSITY.

Supported by the Dean of the College of Education at Kansas State University





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Introduction

Welcome to the world of first generation college (FGC) students in teacher education.

We invite you to come along as we explore the stories of eight FGC students' lived experiences that have led them to becoming aspiring teachers. There are many studies on FGC students, but few of them focus on these students' life stories that may constitute who they are and who they are becoming. We do not present "grand stories" that would make our storytellers heroes or heroines. Rather, we present their everyday, ordinary stories that frequently go unnoticed and yet have significant influences on who they are. According to Tolstoy (1998), life begins with tiny, unnoticeable things. Similarly, we tell stories that begin with the unnoticeable things as we take them for granted, and through understanding those stories, we honor the storytellers whose voices have been traditionally marginalized.

Telling stories is recognized as the primary way we express what we know and who we are since Aristotle. Storytelling is an "artisan form of communication" (Benjamin, 1969, p. 91), whose aim is to provide vicarious experience for the reader rather than merely conveying information in a report. The aim of storytelling goes beyond reporting; rather, it is to help the reader understand what it would be like to be in the shoes of the main character, provoking empathy and compassion. Robinson and Hawpe (1986) point out that stories straddle the line between uniqueness and universality. That is, while a person's story may reveal the storyteller's unique situation or experience, it also reflects some commonalities shared with others' experiences. Hence, stories offer the reader an opportunity to

learn from the storyteller's unique lived experiences, and at the same time, to examine his/her own experience that shares similar characteristics.

Research on FGC students abounds, informing us of the characteristics of this student population. However, most literature on FGC students portrays the characteristics of this population as something deficient, further reinforcing negative stereotypes and self-fulfilling prophecies onto this group of students. The purpose of our research is, hence, to better understand the lived experiences of first generation education students through their *counter stories*, those that defy the deficit model, which often tries to define them. In so doing, we aim to explore what it means to be a FGC student in teacher education and what implications this knowledge may have for schools, universities, and teacher preparation programs.

It is our hope that these stories of FGC students will travel from person to person. While they are personal stories, they also are social stories, in that they illuminate larger social issues surrounding FGC student access and success in secondary and post-secondary education. The stories bring to light the ways in which these students navigate/navigated the college journey, typically without adequate institutional support, and enduring stereotypes that often undermine their integrity and dignity. We hope that these stories will inspire educators, administrators, and policy makers to re-envision their perspectives of and approaches to supporting FGC students in a way that ensures them equitable opportunities to succeed.



Research On First Generation College Students

The current population of students entering institutions of higher education today continues to grow in diversity and complexity. As the socio-economic make up of the U.S. becomes increasingly stratified, the need for a college education has never been more evident (Taylor, 2012). In response to economic pressures, blue-collar and working class populations that historically have not attended colleges and universities are now accessing higher education at significant rates. As of 2012, for the first time ever, one-third of the nation's 25- to 29-year-olds has completed at least a bachelor's degree (Fry, & Parker, 2012).

In search of the *American Dream*, students from immigrant families and students from poverty, most of whom are first generation college students, are venturing out into uncharted waters, uncertain how to navigate the systems of higher education or how they might find their place in a whole new world. Given these significant shifts in demographics, institutions of higher education (IHEs) have struggled with varying levels of success, to understand and effectively support first generation college (FGC) students. For example, the most widely understood definition for a first generation college (FGC) student is the student with neither parent possessing a bachelor's degree (Petty, 2014). This population comprises about 34 percent of those entering four-year institutions nationwide (Choy, 2001). Most first generation college students are beneficiaries of what sociologists call structural mobility (London, 1992) as they attempt to advance their socio-economic

status higher than their parents' who did not finish college (or high school in some cases) and who held working-class or lower class jobs. For these students, going to college is a point of departure from their existing social status, to enter some *other* culture; one that holds promise for a better life than their parents had. This "breaking away" (London, 1989) often produces excitement and hope as well as feelings of loss, conflict, and discontinuity simultaneously (London, 1992).

There has been a growing body of research on first generation college (FGC) students (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Stuber, 2011; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). However, little research has been done about/with FGC students who want to become teachers. This is arguable because of, and in spite of, the fact that very few FGC students choose education as a profession (Morales, 2011; Villegas, & Clewell, 1998). For example, Chen (2005) studied the course taking experiences of first generation students after entering college based on their enrollment in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000. One of her major findings included that in terms of their selection of majors, FGC students were more likely to choose a major in a vocational or technical field, as opposed to "high-skill" fields, such as mathematics and science. Furthermore, about 33 percent of the first generation students remained without a classifiable major, 14 percent selected business, and only 4 percent of them chose education/library/social work fields. It is obvious that education is not a popular choice for first generation students in general. In an effort to better understand the complex realities of FGC students and their college going experiences, we must listen to those few who *did* choose teaching as a career.



In this project, we document the life stories of FGC students (pre-service) and alumni (in-service) in education. Their stories will serve as windows of understanding into what make them become successful teacher candidates and in-service teachers (Achinstein et al., 2010; Herrera, Morales, Holmes, Herrera-Terry, 2011; Irizarry, 2011; Shroyer, et. al, 2009). Based on life story interviews of eight participants (3 postgraduates and 5 current students in teacher education) from a variety of different ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds, the purpose of our research is to better understand the lived experiences of first generation education students through their stories. In so doing, we aim to explore what it means to be a first generation student as a teacher and what implications this knowledge may have for the field of teacher education.

Historical Context for FGC Students Research

Research related to first generation college (FGC) students in the U.S. began in the 1980s with authors such as Alexander Astin, Howard London, Steven Zwerling, and Vincent Tinto. In his seminal piece called, “Breaking away: A study of first generation college students and their families” London (1989) discussed students’ and their families’ unique experiences as they work through the shifting of role assignments as the child matriculates to college. In this study, London’s participants felt the pressure of conflicting requirements of family membership, coupled with isolation and loneliness. More specifically, the families of the FGC students were unable to understand the demands and responsibilities that college placed on them, which made it difficult for students to turn to family for support. Furthermore, very few FGC students had someone on their campus that they felt they could talk to who could relate to their complex identities and responsibilities outside of school.

Studies conducted by researchers such as Pascarella et al (2004), Tinto (1993), and Terenzini et al. (1996) echo the findings in London’s study as they situate this type of isolation within the concept of *weak integration*, where the student experiences a disconnect or *incongruence* between his or her cultural identity and the perceived identity of the institution and his or her peers. Across the college student retention literature, *weak integration* is still arguably the predominant, contributing factor in college student attrition across all groups (Terenzini et al., 1996).



More recently, over the past twenty years, there has been a growing body of research looking at specific aspects and sub-populations within the larger first generation college (FGC) student population (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Stuber, 2011; Shroyer, Yahnke, Morales, Dunn, & Espinoza, 2009; Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996; Von Destinon, 2001). In a comprehensive look at the research on FGC students, investigators have approached their work from different perspectives as well. Some studies, primarily within the field of sociology, focus on the *student* characteristics and experiences within familial and societal contexts, while others focus on the *institution*— its roles, responsibilities and historic struggles to promote successful integration and retention of first generation college students. Despite the approach, all studies acknowledge the fact that first generation college students face greater obstacles in gaining access to postsecondary education, and often have a more difficult transition from secondary school to college than their peers (Hartig, & Steigerwald, 2007; Warburton, Bugarin, & Nuñez, 2001).

Challenges of First Generation College Students

Stuber (2011) discusses that first generation students experience three sets of academic and social challenges. First, first generation college students tend to have less knowledge of what to expect in college and therefore tend to have lower academic aspirations. This often stems from having few opportunities to see variations of future *possible selves* or potential roles that they could hold as educated adults (Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Haag, 1999; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). Lower aspirations can result in unsuccessful college experiences with lower college grades.

Second, first generation students, especially those from low-income backgrounds, are unfamiliar with the dominant, upper to middle-class culture of higher education, and may feel alienated by the bureaucratic nature of the college campus (Goodwin, 2006). Hence, they often, erroneously, are perceived to have *low cultural capital*, specifically within the context of historically white, Eurocentric educational structures (Bennett, McWhorter, & Kuykendall, 2006; Lareau, 2003; Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005; Morales, 2011). The cultural and experiential capital that they develop in their contexts outside of school, are less valued within IHE systems (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992)

Finally, FGC students tend to have lower levels of involvement or engagement; often times, struggling to negotiate conflicts between their home, work, and school responsibilities



(Zwerling, & London, 1992). Issues of priority setting, time management, and boundary setting come into play as students attempt to juggle multiple roles (Shroyer, et al., 2009). Due to constraints on their time, FGC students are more likely to maintain close ties with family members and friends and have fewer interactions with college peers outside of the classroom (Pascarella, et al. 2004; Shroyer, et. al, 2009; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Therefore, *integration* into the academic climate of the campus is very difficult (Tinto, 1975).

Common characteristics of FGC students include being of non-traditional age and coming from poverty (Harvey, 2003). However, there are additional studies that focus more specifically on the confounding factors that challenge culturally and linguistically diverse FGC students in particular (Genzuk, 1997; Genzuk & Baca, 1998; Genzuk & French, 2002; Greene, Marti, & McClenney, 2008; Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Kimweli & Richards, 1999; Maldonado et al., 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Von Destinon, 1988). These studies help us understand the dynamics at play when considering the low number of students of color, in particular, entering and persisting in college.

The study conducted by Chen (2005) documents the impact of these issues on students' successful outcomes. As mentioned previously, she specifically looked at the course taking experiences of FGC students after entering college, based on their enrollment in postsecondary education between 1992 and 2000. Her major findings include: 1) a majority of first generation students (55 percent) took some remedial courses during their college years; 2) roughly 43 percent first generation students who entered postsecondary education during this period left without a degree by 2000; 3) they earned an average

of 18 credits in their first year, compared with 25 credits earned by second-generation students, which explains why there is such a high attrition rate (43 percent); and 4) they were more likely to choose vocational or technical field. FGC students are consistently at a disadvantage, compared to their counterparts, second generation college students.

As seen across many the above-mentioned studies, most research on FGC students tends to focus on the significant *limitations* of and *obstacles* for this population. In many cases, it seems that institutions of higher education (IHEs) primarily blame personal pathologies and/or familial dysfunction for students' lack of persistence in education (Ceja, 2001, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Seymour, & Hewitt, 1997; Valencia, 1998; Valencia & Black, 2002). Gorski (2005) articulates this same observation in this way:

Scholars explain varying levels of opportunity and access (educationally, professionally, and in other spheres) among groups of people by identifying deficits in the cultures and behaviors of the underprivileged group. Scholars using the deficit perspective blame oppressed people for their own oppression by drawing on stereotypes and assumptions usually unsupported by research and disconnected from a larger systemic analysis. (p. 8)

While this is prevalent, there are some researchers who have challenged the *deficit perspective* for studying persistence among diverse and FGC students and have instead begun focusing on the protective nature of personal, familial, and institutional factors for fostering resiliency in students (Benard, 1991, 2004; Blackwell & Pinder, 2014; Ceja, 2004; Fuligni, Witkow, & Garcia, 2005; Ginorio & Huston, 2001; Henderson



& Milstein, 2002; Irizarry, 2011; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Portes, 2008; Valencia & Solórzano, 1998).

In her extensive research with students over the past two decades, Benard (1991, 2004) challenges the label *at risk* for students of color or those who come from poverty. Her research-based framework identifies four internal factors and three external factors that foster student resiliency. She describes internal factors as those characteristics an individual possesses that promote resiliency in the face of struggles. The four personal (internal) factors include: (a) social competence, (b) problem solving skills, (c) autonomy, and (d) a sense of purpose and future. She then defines external factors as those aspects of an individual's environment or family that are conducive to building resiliency. These include (a) caring relationships, (b) high expectations from parents, teachers, and non-parent adults, and (c) opportunities to participate and contribute within meaningful contexts (Benard, 2004). There is a dynamic and synergistic relationship between these two types of factors as one's internal characteristics are directly correlated to the types of environmental factors that he or she is exposed to. Conversely, how one responds to adversity and poor environmental factors is correlated to the types of personal strengths that he or she possesses as an individual (Benard, 2004). This framework provides a strong *counter narrative* to the dominant discourse of deficiency and cultural incongruence used when studying non-majority populations in education.

Despite the odds, resilient FGC students are able to overcome the hurdles in their path to gaining a college degree. As seen in the research by Benard (2004), often times it was a highly effective teacher or quality mentor who played a pivotal role in the FGC student's success.

Many scholars and practitioners such as Louis Moll, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Linda Darling Hammond, Mary E. Dilworth, Geneva Gay, Lisa Delpit, and Sonia Nieto, have contributed much to the field based on their work regarding teacher quality and its complex relationship to race, culture, and class. The large majority of research in this area indicates that teachers who share cultural, linguistic and experiential backgrounds with their students possess *contextual understandings* and skills that they can utilize in effectively supporting students who are like them (Darder, 2011; Morales, 2011; Quiocho, & Rios, 2000; Valenciana, et al., 2006). Although this work points to a documented need for teachers who come from a wide range of backgrounds, the field of education continues to struggle to employ a teacher force that is representative of the current diversity seen within K-12 student populations. As mentioned above, this lack of teachers from diverse cultural and experiential backgrounds is reflected in the minimal amount of research literature that exists on first generation students *in teacher education* (Achinstein et al., 2010; Irizarry, 2011).



Mode of Inquiry: *Narrative Inquiry*

An understanding of the first generation college students requires that we *listen* to their stories individually and collectively from their perspectives and we understand their stories as a way to honor their funds of knowledge established from their life experiences. Hence, narrative inquiry is a fitting methodology. Narrative inquiry is an influential research methodology in many different fields including education, sociology, law, medicine, psychology, and anthropology (see Kim, 2015). Narrative inquiry is a field of its own with its distinctive nature and significance of storytelling while building upon the tenets of qualitative research including frameworks, research methods, and approaches (Bruner, 2002; Clandinin, 2007; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, 2006; Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Following Bruner (1986), who espoused the narrative mode of knowing in which stories are utilized in order to understand the meaning of human actions and experiences, narrative researchers have focused on particularities, analogies, and metaphors of stories that go beyond the facts and rules, offering an open invitation to readers to different feelings, reactions, and interpretations of stories.

According to Polkinghorne (1988), researching stories holds significant promises for qualitative researchers and narrative inquirers in particular because human experiences are expressed in stories. Hence, narrative inquiry explores stories told by different walks of life. It values the everyday, the ordinary, and the quotidian stories that have frequently gone unnoticed (Kim, 2015). Educational philosopher Dunne (2003) emphasizes the importance of stories in research since stories

project a shared understanding of universal themes through particular stories. That is, stories are capable of illuminating other settings through their epiphanic power. In a similar vein, literary scholars, Robinson and Hawpe (1986) point out that a story straddles the two worlds of uniqueness and universality. It has its own particularity and at the same time, it resembles other stories to varying degrees. Hence, educational researchers who utilize stories argue that research on teaching and learning can be best served by narrative modes of inquiry where stories and storytelling are used as a main means of communication.

Narrative researchers inquire into human experience through telling stories, and storytelling is the primary way we human beings express what we know, who we are and who we are becoming (Bruner, 1986, 2002; Polkinghorne, 1988). We tell stories about particular people and their unique experiences, allowing stories to travel from person to person, letting the meaning of story become larger than an individual experience or an individual life (Kim, 2015). According to Benjamin (1969), storytelling is not just information of a report. Rather, it is an “artisan form of communication” (p. 91) as:

It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him [sic] again. Thus the traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (p. 91)

Benjamin tells us that we need to carefully trace the stories that our participants tell like a potter who clings to the clay vessel to create art; hence, storytelling is an “artisan form of communication.”

It is Connelly and Clandinin (1990) who first used the term narrative inquiry in the field of education. Drawing upon the



stories of teachers, students, and parents who are involved with education, Connelly and Clandinin argue that narrative inquiry interrogates educational experience as lived and told stories. In particular, narrative inquiry has been employed by teacher educators and researchers to highlight teachers' personal, practical knowledge (Clandinin, & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1999), their biographies (Goodson, 1992, 1995, 2000, 2011), lived experiences shaping professional identities and teaching practices (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007), and the complexities of teachers' personal and professional selves (Kelchtermans, 2009). As such, narrative inquiry has played a significant role in research and practice in the field of teacher education.

Our research is biographical narrative inquiry in which we tell first generation college students' stories. In biographical narrative research, we pay attention to personal narratives, which are never simply "personal." They are crucial entry points or portals for examining one's lived experience in relation to historical, social, and cultural contexts (Chase, 2003, 2011).

Data Collection Methods ¹

Life Story Interviews

Life story interviews are the most common method used by narrative inquirers, which is based on the unstructured, open-ended interview format. Life story interview is a way of understanding the past and the present of the interviewee, which includes the important events, experiences, and feelings that the interviewee chooses to tell (Kim, 2015; Rosenthal, 1993). It looks for the wholeness in a person's life, as Atkinson (2007) refers to as "one's life as a whole in the voice of the teller, as it is remembered and in a language that is deeply felt" (p. 237).

In order to dig into their life stories, we individually interviewed eight participants twice, at two different locations, visiting their homes, hometowns, former schools, or driving through their old neighborhoods to evoke their memories. We also interviewed their family members, relatives, friends, and neighbors to help us better understand the participants' stories. Five of the participants are pre-service teachers and the other three are in-service teachers. All the interviews are videotaped with the interviewees' permission. Interviewees were informed of the project and agreed to participate in the project. Before videotaping, they signed the consent form for videotaping and release of the video recordings only for educational purposes. Please see the table on the following page for participant information. Other data collection methods include observations, photos and artifacts offered by the participants.



Participants

Name	Identified Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Current Level Position	Major	Additional Interviewees
Jessica	F	White	Junior	Elementary	Mother & Father
Kris	M	Black	Senior	Secondary Social Studies	
Ciera	F	Bi-racial (Black/White)	Senior	Secondary Mathematics	Adoptive Mother & Father
Helene	F	Vietnamese	Junior	Secondary ESL	Mother & Brother
Lisa	F	White	Senior	Secondary Social Studies	Aunt & Adoptive Father
Angelica	F	Latina (Mexican)	Science Teacher	Elementary/Middle Science & ESL	Mother & Father
Martin	M	Latino (Mexican)	Asst. Principal/Athletic Director	Secondary Social Studies	
Chuck	M	Black	Founder/Executive Director, Urban Scholastic Center	Graphic Design & Art Education	

Lisa's Story: Always for the Underdog

My Childhood



I'm from a small town called Effingham, Kansas. If you ask me about my childhood, I don't know where to start. It's really foggy; I think it's because I don't want to remember it. It was just tragic since my mother passed away when I was four. She didn't survive a car accident. Since then, I moved around so much with my dad whenever he changed his girlfriends. My dad had a few girlfriends while he was trying to raise me. So, I kept getting dragged along with his changes. I don't think my dad was capable of being the kind of a dad that we all want. And not surprisingly, he finally gave up being a dad. When I turned eight, he decided to put me up for adoption. He gave my maternal grandmother first chance. Luckily, my grandma adopted me legally. Thank God, if my grandma had said no, I would have just been sent to a foster care home. You know what it is like there.

My life with grandma was slightly better than living with my dad in his girlfriend's house. There was a lot less physical abuse in my grandma's place but my grandma was not a person who showed her affection easily. I didn't even really know if she had any feelings because her interaction with me was kinda robotic and removed. What I really wanted was a loving parent, you know, but my grandma was unable to give me the kind of love I wanted. But as I grew older, I learned to be just my own person, and stayed in my room a lot. When I came home from school, I



would stay in my room all day, doing homework, reading books, and watching TV. Bringing friends to my place was not allowed, and I was not allowed to go to their places, either. So, for the most part, I had a lonely childhood through middle school.

What made me get out of my own little cocoon was babysitting, which was my first job. I got that job when I turned 15 through my history teacher's recommendation. My history teacher believed in me and knew that I was a responsible person. So, he introduced me to his friend Mr. McNerny when he was looking for a babysitter for his three children. Mr. McNerny hired me on the spot. I started commuting from my grandma's to Mr. McNerny's, but eventually I moved in with his family, per Mr. McNerny's suggestion as they had a spare room. I was just happy to get out of my grandma's. It gave me a sense of freedom. This is how my relationship with Mr. McNerny's family started.

Living with Mr. McNerny's family was a very good decision. Over five years of babysitting, Mr. McNerny's family treated me as a part of his family. As I started living with them, Mr. McNerny referred to me as his daughter and his daughters called me Sister. For the first time, I felt like I had a real family. Mr. McNerny even legally adopted me when I turned 21! When Mr. McNerny found out how much it would cost me (about \$120 per month) to get healthcare, he decided to adopt me because that way I could be on his health care plan for nothing. I am truly grateful to Mr. McNerny and his family.

Who I Am

I am an outgoing and caring person. I know I tend to wear a lot of emotions on my sleeve but it's because I really care. I learned to be a person with empathy. I think my rough childhood made

me become stronger and have more empathy for kids who don't have a loving relationship at home. I can tell when something is not right with somebody, almost immediately. Ever since I was small, I was always for the underdog. I still am. I'll fight for the underdog. I have always been an advocate for people who are underprivileged or who don't have much. I've always wanted to help everybody. I think I got that from my mom whom I still admire. When I was younger, I even felt guilty for my mom. I was like, why am I here and my mom is not? Although I grew out of that guilty feeling, living a life that my mom would be proud of has become a new mission for me. I want to be a good person and do good things with my life. I want to help other people because you never know who's out there that needs help. When I help somebody, I feel so great inside that I feel like I could conquer the world! I want people to know that there is and will always be somebody who cares.

I love listening to stories. It is always inspiring to just hear the stories of people who have been through a lot, or who have been through worse than I have been through. I want to be one of them who doesn't give up. I don't wanna give up, because if I do, I will let my people down. I want to do something with my life that I'm going to love, which is to help other people.





Going to College

Well, I didn't really have a lot of help getting to college. My grandma gave me a form for one scholarship through her work, but she didn't really worry about anything else. But at the end of my junior year, my adoptive father Mr. McNerny asked me if I had done any scholarships or had applied for college yet. I didn't really know what he was asking about and didn't know how to go about applying for college. Neither did he know about it because he didn't finish his college degree. So one afternoon, he and I got online and went through applications. We looked at financial aid and scholarships. He also bought me a book, *The Big Book of Scholarships*, from Barnes and Noble. I went through the book, but I didn't find anything that I would be qualified for. Fortunately, I also had teachers to whom I could talk about colleges. I asked one counselor if there was a way to get to K-State, which was my dream school. I was a die-hard fan although I had never visited there before. I asked the counselor, "Can we get a small group of us and all go down to K-State for a campus visit?" The counselor kindly said yes and we had a great visit to the campus!

When I got an acceptance letter from K-State, I was ecstatic and thrilled. I was so happy that I cried, and was bouncing all over the place. I was so worried about not getting accepted because my ACT score was barely above the cut score. I didn't get any scholarships but I was just happy that I got accepted! The acceptance letter meant more than getting into my dream school. It was my ticket out of the small town I was living in. I said to myself, "I'm done here. I don't have to be here any more."

Being in College

What helped me the most during the transition from high school to college was the CAT (Curriculum Across Topics) program, which is available for first-year college students. I signed up for it because I wanted to make a great start here. I was a part of the residential CAT communities where I lived with others who shared academic interests with me in the same hall. We did a lot of socializing as well as studying together. It helped me to get adjusted to the big change from high school especially because I had never had anybody to help me prepare for college. There was a professor who always respected us and let us freely come and talk to him whenever we needed. I also had a mentor (academic advisor) that was assigned to me. I met her only a couple of times during the semester. I had a pretty good feel of what was going on between the teachers and the RAs in the dorms.

For me, the hardest thing in college was time management. I felt that there were too many breaks, compared to high school where we were in class everyday all day. You know *Harry Potter*? In book Six, Ron says, "Oh, we have all these free periods." Hermione responds, "I bet you we're gonna have so much homework, though, and we'll have to work through all of them on our own." Sure enough, they did. And that's how it is here: We had a lot of free time but also a lot of homework to do. The freshman year was not that bad, but from then on, time management was something I needed to learn. I found that textbooks were much harder to read and took more time to understand in college. It took me a while to learn how to use my free time periods for studying.



Another thing I struggled with was finding right buildings for my classes. There were so many different buildings on campus and I was very confused. In my freshman year, I also had a lot of roommate problems.

Becoming a Teacher

The main reason I wanted to be a teacher is because it was my mom's dream if she were still alive. She went to a small Christian college here in Manhattan hoping to be a teacher. But a year later, she got pregnant with me and dropped out of college right before I was born. She never went back to college because going to school as a single mom was too hard. So, in a way, my being a teacher would make my mom's dream come true.

I am currently a junior in the College of Education majoring in social studies. I want to be a social studies teacher because most of my favorite teachers were history teachers. What I learned in social studies class, especially through debates, is invaluable. I learned how to be respectful of others from debates. My social studies teachers knew how to express themselves about controversial issues without offending anyone. They taught us how to say our thoughts and feelings without hurting others'. Debate times were one of the most fun school times for me. We learned how to debate by being respectful of others, letting other people talk, and not making fun of each other.

The most respected social studies teacher I had was Miss Hanson. I had her in my sophomore and senior year in high school. She was the kind of teacher who would always be there to help, and to whom I could go and talk if I was having a bad day. She was that person that I always felt comfortable talking to. She was a fair and just referee when it came to



classroom management. She didn't say much when there was somebody rude and unruly. She reminded us that we all had a responsibility to get the classroom game going. Those unruly kids would stop being rude upon her reminder. So, I wanna be that person for my students as well. I want to be that person who listens. My door will always be open to those students who just need to vent, or who need to talk about something to somebody else. I want to be that teacher for my students, and I want them to feel comfortable enough in my class that they want to be there. If you're having the worst day of your life and you don't think it's not gonna get better, I want you to be able to come in and feel comfortable talking to me. I want my students to feel like they're accepted in my classroom, respected there, and that that is a place that they can be themselves and voice their opinions.

I have a soft spot for those kids who have the most troubled past, the troubled backgrounds, especially if it's a family problem. I just love those kids. I just want to bring them home with me and show them that they are cared for and that they matter. I know it may not be a big deal to everybody, but to



these kids, having somebody to accept them or having a place where they feel okay and accepted is one of the greatest things you can possibly give somebody who doesn't feel okay at home. I know it from my own experience. So, I just know how to approach the kids who are troublemakers and who don't necessarily like authority. If you approach them with respect, they'll be more likely to respond positively to you.

I am ready to go out to teach. I want to be the best teacher I can be. I want to make a difference because I wouldn't be here without those teachers who were there for me.



Lisa: Voices of Support

- ▶ **A Job Turns Into a Family: Lisa's Adoptive Father**
- ▶ **Worries About Preparedness: Lisa's Adoptive Father**
- ▶ **The Scholarship Process: Lisa's Adoptive Father**
- ▶ **Family Experiences Growing Up: Lisa's Aunt**
- ▶ **Caring Teachers Make a Difference: Lisa's Aunt**

Helene's Story: Borderlands and New Beginnings

Introduction



Helene is a senior in college who aspires to be an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher. According to her oldest brother, Helene is an independent, hard-working girl. At the interview, Helene showed confidence, passion, pride, and maturity as a soon-to-be-a teacher while sharing painful but wonderful memories of what it was like growing up as a second generation of Vietnamese immigrants and being a first generation college student.

Helene tends to stand out from the mid-Western college crowd not only due to her striking beauty, but also due to her multi-racial identity with an Asian trait since there are not many Asian students to speak of in the College of Education here at K-State. Helene's father is Vietnamese, but her mother is half-White and half-Vietnamese. Helene's maternal grandfather was an American soldier in Vietnam. The unknown American soldier left the country without providing any support for his daughter (Helene's mother), which happened quite often after the war was over. Helene's grandmother never tried to contact Helene's grandfather because she didn't want to be a burden on him. Helene's grandmother kept the burden to herself. She grew



up poor in a farm village where people were living in huts. The villagers belittled Helene's mother because she was not full Vietnamese. People would throw rocks at her, push her away, and make fun of her. The hostility

toward her was too unbearable that she dropped out of school, and started selling candy on the street and picking scraps so that she could help feed her family. This was what she did until she met Helene's father. Soon after getting married, they immigrated to the U.S.

Growing up

Helene was born in Pomona, a small town about 30 minutes away from Los Angeles. She has two older brothers (five and six years apart) and one younger brother. The town where they grew up is a very poor community in which minorities such as Hispanic, Chinese, and Vietnamese immigrants make up the tapestry of the town with only a few equally poor Whites. Helene has a fond memory of this town because being a minority was not a problem there. There were no bullies, no hooligans, no fighters; everyone felt that they were in the same boat—being immigrants. The small town provided a great environment for learning English because they spoke different languages, and English was the one “common denominator.” Another commonality was poverty. Everyone was poor there, and most of the kids didn't have their own toys. They all went out to play on jungle gyms in the community or play on the

streets with sticks or whatever they could find. Or kids would play in the community-swimming pool that was filled with dirt, as it was not used as a pool any more. Kids would go there and plant flowers and do other things. Everyone was friendly to everyone, speaking English. Helene stated:

I didn't feel like I was poor. Around Christmas, we would get donations from the school and from the community. But a lot of kids did, so I thought it was a normal thing. I thought everyone got it, so I never thought of it as charity. I just thought, “Oh, they're giving me toys, which I don't have,” which is nice.

Helene lived right across the street from the school. She never needed a latchkey and could just walk across the street to get home. Helene was one of the few Vietnamese students who spoke fluent Vietnamese and fluent English. At home, her dad would forbid her from speaking English, so she spoke only Vietnamese. But at school, they would forbid her from speaking Vietnamese. Being in those two different circumstances, she had to be fluent in both languages.

She became a language broker at an early age. She began translating both at home and at school. She used to be called out of class 3 or 4 times a week, to help teachers with translation whenever they had Vietnamese parents who didn't speak English. She served as a translator even at parent-teacher conferences after school. Although the demand of being the only translator was sometimes too much and frustrating, Helene felt proud to be able to help teachers. She also helped her mom's older friend, who spoke limited English, get her citizenship with the paperwork and translation at the court.



Helene's Brothers

The role Helene's two older brothers played in Helene's life is undeniable. Helene's parents owned a nail salon in California. They spent most of the day and night there, sometimes without coming home. So, for Helene, her brothers were the ones who practically raised her. They would even do girl things with her, like teaching her how to braid her hair and do her makeup, things like that. Helene stated:

They absolutely babied me. They were always there to support me. When they heard someone was treating me bad at school they would go there, talk and shake 'em up. And they were always there to help me with my homework, so it was really encouraging to have them always there... I don't know what I would do without my brothers.



But when Helene turned 11, her brothers left the house as soon as they turned 16 and 17. This was due primarily to conflicts they had with their father who was not "Americanized," and was set in his own "traditional, Vietnamese" way regarding raising his kids born in America. For example, their father wouldn't allow the boys to do "normal" things like going out and playing with their friends. He never asked what they wanted to do or how they wanted to live their own lives. He also put a lot of pressure on them to be the number one in class or else. So, as soon as they became teenagers, Helene's brothers left the house and did their own thing while staying with their friends and their families.

Coming to Kansas

When Helene was a freshman in high school, her parents got divorced unexpectedly. Helen didn't know it was coming. Helen's mom took Helene and her younger brother and they got on the bus to Kansas. They moved in with Helene's aunt who ran a nail salon in Kansas City. Helene's mom worked there for a while but the job didn't last long because her limited eyesight made it too difficult to do nails properly. Helene's family was forced to move out of the aunt's place. They moved into a one bedroom apartment in a rundown neighborhood. Helene then attended Olathe North, which is known as "the ghetto school of Olathe." Six months later, when Helene's brothers heard about their mom's struggle, they dropped what they were doing in California and moved back in to the small apartment. Living with her older brothers, no matter how small and uncomfortable the apartment was, gave Helene a different view of her family. She stated:

Before, we had been really spread apart. My brothers left home when I was 11 years old, and then my parents divorced. So it was really hard to think of my family as a close-knit family, because we were never together. And when we moved to this apartment, it really opened my eyes. I saw how they were willing to do anything for each other. I mean, my brothers would sleep on the floor so I could sleep on the bed. Even though everything around us wasn't very nice, as long as we were together it was really fun.

Helene's brothers started supporting the family by working two or three odd jobs to make the ends meet. At the same time, they were able to go to a beauty school and received their license as nail technicians and ultimately got stable jobs. And



Helene's mom finally found a job in a sewing factory. With the small success of the brothers' nail business, they were able to move to Johnson County, Kansas. Johnson County is one of the wealthiest counties in Kansas with a White majority.

Johnson County was quite different from Los Angeles. When she was enrolled, everyone in Johnson County looked at her weird because she was one of the few Asian students there. Despite the fact that she is an American, she was sometimes an easy target for name calling, like "Chink," "rice picker," or "opium picker." Helene stated, "It was hard, having people look at me like I'm not Vietnamese, or I'm not American, even though I'm both."

It made Helene confused because it had never occurred to her before that being an Asian or a Vietnamese was a "bad" thing that deserved name-calling. People made all kinds of assumptions about her, e.g., being a model minority, being good at math, being quiet, and being submissive.

However, moving to Johnson County was a good move for Helene overall because it was a safer environment than Los Angeles. The school was more peaceful and quieter than the schools in LA where there were racial wars, fighting, and people being stabbed and shot on high school campuses. Helene made lots of friends and she eventually felt accepted in Johnson County.

Going to College

Neither of Helene's parents completed their high school education. Helene didn't expect to go to college, either. College education wasn't always the first thing on her mind. Instead, she frequently thought that she should just go straight into



doing nails or something like that to help the family with finances. She saw her mom struggling when they moved from California to Kansas. She felt that she needed to be there for her family and make money, so that they could maybe buy a car, buy a house, or something. She thought that she would work at the nail salon part-time, eventually get her nail license, and start working with her family, just like her brothers did. But her mom and brothers were adamant about her going to college. When she expressed interest in working at a nail salon, they said firmly in unison:

No, you're not. We don't want you to touch people's feet for a living. We want you to have a better life. We want you to get an education and get further than we have, so that your children will get further than you have.

Helene's brothers wanted Helene and their younger brother to fulfill their dreams for them, and one of the dreams was to get a college education. And that was the whole reason they moved to Kansas from California. Helene's oldest brother stated:

I guess you could say that I have some expectations of my own that I expect of them, that I want them to fulfill



for themselves as well as for myself, so that I don't feel like maybe it wasn't that I didn't come out here for any reason, that I wasted my time out here. You know what I mean?

Helene's oldest brother tried to fill the father figure for his siblings, something that Helene's mother couldn't/didn't do. Indeed, without the brothers' sacrifice and support, Helene might not have gone to college. They told Helene that it wasn't her responsibility to take care of the family, but it was her responsibility to go to college. They insisted that she had to go to college for the family because Helene's going to college eventually would open the door for her little brother to follow her footsteps. Helene stated:

I do feel like I am a bridge because my younger brother... he never thought he was gonna go to college. He always thought he was just gonna pick up some minimum wage job and just work up to be a manager or something. And I was determined to make him go to college, and make him get a degree in anything as long as he had a degree. And he finally has realized that education is fun... which I think is great.

With the brother's encouragement and insistence, Helene started looking for a college in the spring semester before her graduation high school. When she told her teachers and friends about going to college, they were excited and enthusiastic about it. Teachers and counselors helped her with applications for scholarships, and looked over her essays. And she got into the College of Education.

A big hurdle for Helene being in college the first year was her homesickness. Being so close to her family because they

all lived together in a small house, it was hard for her to live without them. In the first year of college, Helene felt that she was too immature to live alone; she was too accustomed to being "babied" by her brothers. She would stay up at night wondering, "Did I make the right choice?" "Should I call them and ask them if I should take this class or not?" She was lost many times not knowing what to do with classes and other things. The first year was not a pleasant experience. She drove home almost every weekend.

It was after the first year of college when she started utilizing the student services and meeting with student advisors in the advising center at the college. Student advisors were the ones who convinced Helene that it was up to her to select which classes to take and that she had the freedom to choose whatever class she wanted. She started taking ownership of her college education by exercising more liberties and freedom with her choice of classes. That's when Helene began thinking of college life as enjoyable.

Majoring in ESL

Helene is passionate about becoming an ESL teacher after graduation because she doesn't feel that she had good ESL teachers when she was learning English. In fact, she had terrible ESL teachers. She remembered being yelled at and being ignored in class because she just didn't understand what was going on. She had a first grade teacher who used to scream at her and other ESL students until her face turned red. Teachers didn't think much of her and even told her that she wouldn't be able to learn English, not to mention reading books in English. She was not expected to get into the advanced English classes. However, Helene loved reading and was able to read *Harry Potter* in second grade. It was not until her family stepped in



and insisted Helene be tested out of ESL that teachers realized Helene had potential. It was not a good experience with those ESL teachers, and the experience is what motivated Helene to become an ESL major. She stated:

So, what drove me to become an ESL teacher is so I could be able to give those ESL students a chance with education, so they don't feel so discouraged when they don't understand English or anything. Because if they learn, it will open so many different doors for them... And if they weren't determined to learn, I would make them determine to learn because it's not an opportunity they should miss.

Inspired by Helene's passion for teaching ESL, her mother started taking night classes to learn English, and she can hold a small conversation now. Helene can't wait to become a teacher. She looks forward to helping immigrant students who are learning English.

Helene: Voice of Support

 **A Family's Sacrifice: Helene's Brother**

Jessica's Story: A Hidden Struggle

Introduction



Many people look at families or people from the outside looking in and think they must have it all. Looks can be very deceiving, however. Every person has a story and many times we just go through our days with ever really knowing the person we room with, eat lunch with, go to class with or work with. No one would have ever known Jessica's story, had she not been so willing to share it. Jessica seems to have it all on the surface: She

has a great loving family, her parents own several businesses so she doesn't have to worry about money, and she is getting a high quality education. Jessica states:

People are really surprised when I tell them I am first generation. Cause they're like, wow your dad must have done really well, then. And yeah, we're definitely very grateful. My dad did very well for a person not having a college education. He got very lucky.

Jessica is a FGC student who has a story that people don't often hear. Jessica's struggles as a first generation college student could have gone unnoticed if we didn't pay attention to her story. According to Jessica:

People assume because my family does really well, my dad owns several companies. My mom has been able to



be a stay-at-home mom my entire life. They just assume that my parents were college educated, and I'm just following in their footsteps. But I don't think they realize all that my parents went through to get to that spot. They weren't just given it.

Jessica's Parents



Jessica's mother had a very rough childhood growing up. She didn't have the best start to education. She wasn't set up to succeed. Due to her parents' dysfunction, she went to school hungry most days. She didn't have anyone at home who would help her with homework or read to her. She didn't have access to books or education related materials. As a result, she basically gave up on education around the second grade. She eventually dropped out of school

and got her GED later. Jessica's father didn't fare much better. He had a better environment, but was labeled as a "SpEd Kid" (student with special needs). He was disadvantaged from that point on. That was when Special Education was integrated into the general population and was underfunded and under supported. The teachers didn't know what to do with him so they put him somewhere where he could be controlled. It was not until recently that he was diagnosed with ADHD. When he was in high school, a guidance counselor told him that post-secondary education wasn't an option for him and that he



should just join the military. This left a black mark on his school experience and he didn't pursue education any further from that point on.

Jessica's parents wanted to make sure that none of these things would ever happen to their children. Her father worked hard, building up his business and her mother stayed at home to make sure all their kids' basic needs were taken care of.

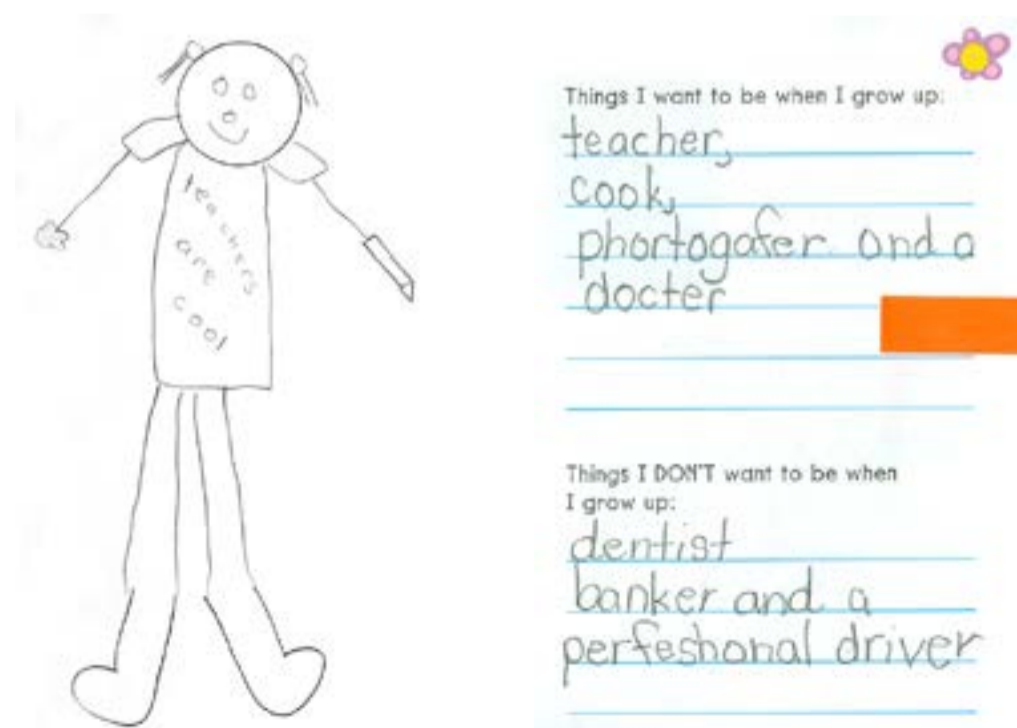
I've lived in Shawnee my whole life. Actually, I guess pretty much my whole life. My neighborhood is amazing, and I have the most amazing neighbors, you could ever ask for, that just do amazing things for us. I live right near a park, I live within walking distance to my elementary school, middle school, and high school. I love Shawnee, because you can drive 15 minutes and be in the heart of Kansas City. And you can drive 15 minutes the other way and be absolutely in the middle of nowhere. I think I had the best of both worlds

growing up. I had an awesome school district, awesome neighbors, awesome friends. We have the Johnson County bubble stereotype, as my mom likes to call it. She says we live in bubble and we don't realize it. My elementary school was probably 99% white, affluent, upper middle class. It is the richest county in Kansas, and they call it the Orange County of the Midwest for a good reason.

Her parents valued education because they weren't given the opportunity. Jessica was never really told that she was going to college, but it was always an unspoken understanding.

I don't know if they ever explicitly said, "You're going to college." But it was always... I've felt it, maybe because I had the drive myself that they didn't feel the need to tell me. They never pushed it and they didn't care where I went.

And Jessica knew from her early age that she wanted to be a teacher.



I've known since the age of three I wanted to be a teacher. I loved everything about school. I would spend time thinking about lessons to use when my cousins or friends would come over. Any time my cousins would come over, I would immediately start working on a lesson plan. Some of my favorite Christmas gifts were workbooks, school supplies, and stuff.

Jessica will be the first teacher ever in her family. There is the saying that people will not remember what you said to them, but they will remember how you made them feel. Luckily, Jessica was very lucky never to have encountered any negativity in school. It was always a positive experience, and one that helped her to understand the responsibility that teachers have.

I think teachers have such a responsibility to make an impact, and I think some people don't realize one action, one word, one movement, one second of an interaction between a teacher and a student can have a impact on that student for the rest of their life.

She recalls a time when she was in this class called Exploring Teacher Education. She got to help out in a third grade classroom for a whole semester. She got to teach lessons, grade papers, work one-on-one with students. The teacher told her that she was really good at teaching, which was a great affirmation for Jessica.

Going to College

Since Jessica was the first in her family to go to college she had to do most of the work on her own. She had to let her parents know about deadlines and if she needed money for an exam or an application.



My whole experience, everything was, “Okay Jessica. You figure it out and you tell us how it works.” My parents were never there to say it’s time to enroll in high school. Here is your schedule and figure out what you need to take. It was always, I have to figure it out on my own. It was all up to me and if I forgot to do something then it was all on me. I had to know when to take the ACT. My parents didn’t even know what the ACT was. I was the guinea pig, and they were testing everything on me and now my brother kind of has some experience, and so they kind of know a little bit more about college application thanks to me.

Thankfully, an admissions representative at K-State was very helpful when it came to filling out the application.

I got 20 cards in the mail from her saying, “If you ever have any questions, you can email me.” So I always felt like I did have a link to K-State, but also my school counselors in high school were really great and I knew I could ask them anything. They offered lots of workshops and stuff on how to apply, and how to study for the ACT. They definitely set us up to be prepared, which was good because I had no idea what I was doing.

College Life

One would think that since Jessica had a pretty successful life and had traversed entry into college life that things would continue to be great. But, that is not the typical experience for any FGC student. Getting in is half the battle the other half is staying in school.



Jessica had a rough transition to college, but once she found out how things worked and found some people to mentor her through the process, she felt more determined to finish her college degree.

My first semester was quite interesting. I felt like I wasn’t enjoying school as much as I possibly could, and it seemed like everyone around me was loving school and I just wasn’t. And I think it was really tough because, like I said, I was the guinea pig and so, I didn’t know how anything worked. It was just so different from high school, coming from seven hours a day, going from this class to that class and then college... You’re pretty much on your own and they expect you to figure out everything and the classes were formatted completely differently. My homework wasn’t worksheets out of a textbook, which is what I mostly knew how to do, and it was just a completely different experience. You had to learn how to study completely different.



It wasn't just about the academic aspect of college life, either, that Jessica had a hard time with. There were all those little things that second and third generation college students might take for granted.

I think people who have long traditions of their family going to the same school, they know it all. They know all the cool places to eat and they know all the things to do. I mean if they are having this problem they can just call up one of their parents, or something and ask for help, but I never felt like I had that. And I was envious of people that had this long history with the school because they seemed so comfortable, they already knew the fight song, they already knew the cheers. I didn't know any of that. I've caught on pretty quick but it's the little things that you don't think will make a big difference.

The first year of college was not easy. Everything was new, a new roommate, new teachers, new town, and new campus. She didn't know anyone. She fell into a sort of depression because she didn't know what to do with herself. It was not until she



started joining clubs that she felt more comfortable about maneuvering through college life.

I think joining a bunch of clubs really helped even though people think I'm crazy because I'm in so many clubs, but I do it because I love it and I love to stay busy and it gives me purpose in life. I think one of the greatest things about college is that you have such a wide variety of people that you can get to know, students and professors, and your students are your peers and they're in the same place in life as you. There is no other time in your life where you are going to be around so many that are further along in their education, further along in their experience than professors. You're not doing yourself good if you're not getting to know the people that you're paying to have class with.

Jessica couldn't be happier being in the college of education because she wants to be able to help her future students find their way to success.

I think in this day and age, it's almost crazy to not finish college. As long as you're trying something. There's always vocational school, but you shouldn't stop at high school. You should always continue to do better and try. So I would hope that every generation after me would go to college and I will definitely hold that expectation for my kids and grandkids. But it's up to them. I'm not going to force anyone to do anything they really don't want to. There are too many kids who are miserable going to college because their parents told them they had to. I don't want my kids to be miserable.



Jessica’s advice to other first gen students is to get involved. She says, “Break out of your comfort zone and do something you have never done before. There will always be people to help you through it, you just have to ask.”

Jessica: Voices of Support

- ▶ **First in the Family Family: Jessica’s Father**
- ▶ **College Transition: Jessica’s Father**
- ▶ **First Year Struggles: Jessica’s Mother**
- ▶ **Taking the Initiative: Jessica’s Mother**
- ▶ **Why Choose College?: Jessica’s Mother**

Kris’s Story: Making *His* Story

Introduction

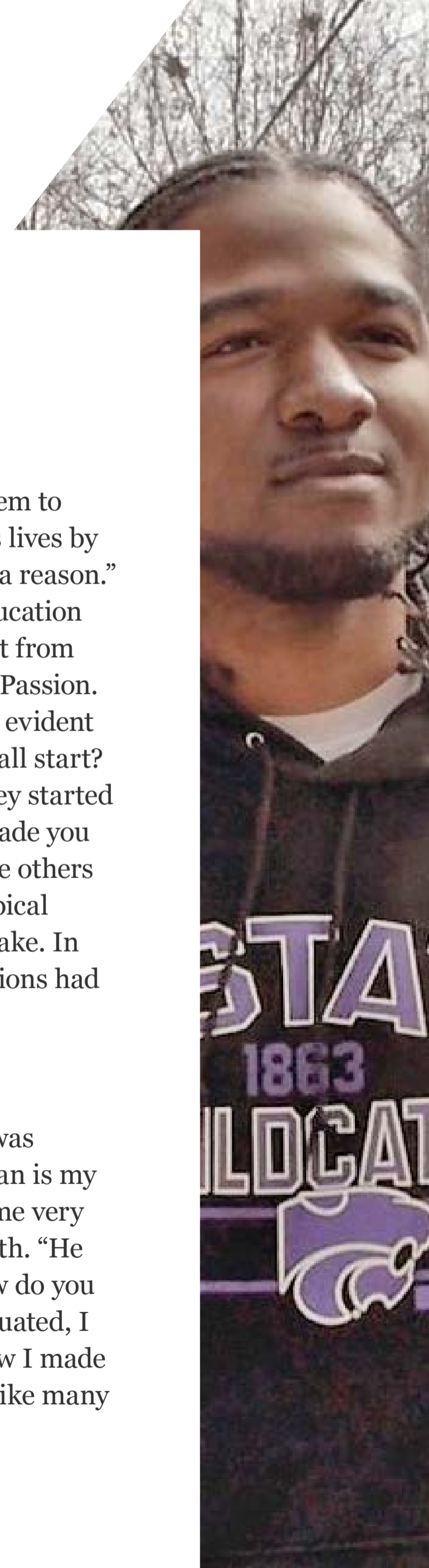


Every journey in ones life brings them to where they are supposed to be. Kris lives by the belief, “Everything happens for a reason.” Kris is currently a social studies education major. What makes Kris so different from other secondary education majors? Passion. His passion for teaching students is evident when you talk to him. Where did it all start?

How did he begin his journey? Kris believes his journey started with other teachers who had passion. Teachers who made you think and think deeply about life. Kris wants to inspire others to reach their full potential. Kris’s journey wasn’t a typical journey, but it is a journey that many FGC students make. In the story below, we the authors, recount the conversations had with Kris as he reflected on his life experiences.

Influence

Kris first realized he wanted to be a teacher while he was attending Sumner Academy in Kansas City. “Manhattan is my home, but for a time I was in Kansas City.” He had some very influential role models. One of his favorites is Mr. Smith. “He pushed us. He would say, ‘If you can’t do this now, how do you think you will be able to do it in college?’ When I graduated, I saw all the teachers in their robes and caps, and I knew I made the right decision.” Kris didn’t always want to teach. Like many other students he wanted to do many different things.





One of the first careers I thought of was writing. I was in 6th grade. I still have some of the stories I wrote. I liked reading *Goose Bumps* by R.L. Stine. I wrote a true story, with some artistic liberties to instill some emotion. My grandparent's babysat a kid who died in a fire. I wrote a story about him. I showed it to one of my teachers and she started crying. All the other kids were like what did you do to her? I didn't know why she was crying. She then told me to go to the office. I thought I was in trouble, but the principal read the story and started crying. They told me it was such a well-written story and that I had talent. After that moment I was determined to write a series called The Heart and Soul series, of course I never did finish any of those.

A small excerpt from a story Kris wrote in school:

September 25, 1997:

I'm just getting off the bus. My friend is leaving with his mom waving at me. I waved to him for the last time. Later that night, someone comes knocking on the door. I answer it and hear some bad news. These people tell me something happened to my friend. I figure that he almost got hit by a car just like last week... [The lady] wants to talk to my grandma, so I go back to my room and tell her. I'm sitting on my bed when I hear a blood-curdling scream. "The boy has died in a fire." I didn't start to cry, but I was shaking out of control.

His passion for story telling is evident in his passion for history. After all history is his story.

Opportunities



The oldest of five children, Kris didn't have a relationship with his father and he rarely saw his mother, stepfather, and siblings who lived in Kansas City. He was practically raised by his grandparents in Manhattan, Kansas. They were typical grandparents he knew who cared for more than one grandchild.

Given the circumstances, from Kris' perspective, he had a great deal of freedom while living with his grandparents. He was born in a generation where you could stay out until the streetlights came on. "My grandparents were working and taking care of others so they didn't really have time to check to see if I had homework or if I did it." Despite their age and lack of time to devote to him individually, Kris loved his grandmother dearly. She was his everything until she developed cancer. Soon after, Kris found himself taking care of her almost full time instead of the other way around. "Whatever I did do, I got done on my own," he said in relation to academics. As a result of his situation, he grew up quickly.

After his grandmother passed away, he lived with an uncle and aunt for a while in Indianapolis. His uncle was a huge football strategist. Kris remembers:

I was really good at football. I was fast and I could catch. He pushed me to be better, faster, and stronger... I don't want to brag, but I was pretty good. I sometimes think about what [if] I would have stayed with my aunt and uncle, where would I be now?



Unfortunately, there were some incidents that led him to leave their house and his mother wanted him to move back to Kansas, so he moved to Kansas City to be with her.



Kris had immense popularity while in living with his grandparents in Manhattan. “I used to have a trail of kids who followed me.” However, things were different in Kansas City. When he arrived at the middle school near his mom’s house, he didn’t get the reception he had anticipated. “I got made fun of because I sounded ‘white.’ All that popularity I had in Manhattan vanished.” Since he didn’t really fit in at the public schools, he began

looking at other alternatives. “A friend of mine told me about Sumner Academy and that you had to take this special test to get in. I decided to try it and got accepted.” Kris flourished at the school and he also played football. However, because he didn’t start out playing in Kansas City he rarely got the opportunities to excel in sports like he had in Manhattan. “Sumner was like the elite school. We were looked at differently so we became really tight. We looked out for each other.” While Sumner was a bright spot, the situation at home was not always the best.

As Kris drove along the streets of Kansas City, he told me stories of growing up in that area. There were the times he would miss the bus and have to walk several blocks in order to reach Sumner. He recalled a time when his Dad wasn’t home, but was supposed to be watching him and his sister. There

was no food in the house to eat except for a bag of potatoes. Kris remembers how he and his sister got creative and used the whole bag, making potatoes three different ways. It wasn’t always easy for Kris.

Overcoming the Odds

The road to college was not paved in gold either. As a FGC student, college seemed to be a lofty dream prior to Sumner Academy. While his prospects and preparation greatly improved as a result of attending Sumner, Kris didn’t have anyone to help fill out forms or apply for scholarships. His high school counselor helped, but he missed out on many opportunities for scholarships because he missed the deadlines. Despite these roadblocks, Kris knew from an early age, living in Manhattan, that he would one day return to attend K-State. “I didn’t even think of applying anywhere else.” His first two years at K-State were rough, primarily due to having too much freedom and not knowing how to manage it.

Kris lived on his own at first, with nothing in his apartment but a mattress and a few chairs. Eventually he moved in with some friends and that is when he started going out more and studying less. “My lifestyle at the time was not conducive to sleep or education.” Therefore, he knew he needed to take a break.

I worked. I worked in multiple places; saving money and getting my frame-of-mind right. When I first started after high school I didn’t take it as seriously. I had to take some time to mature... Working allowed me to realize that I really did want to teach. Taking the time off really helped me. Part of my working experience was at Bergman Elementary School as a paraeducator. I worked two jobs when I first came back.

His experiences in the classroom working with children fueled his desire to try again and provide the motivation to stay focused.

Self-Determination

As a returning student, he is not only a FGC student, but also a non-traditional student. There is no one to help him pay bills, buy books, or even help out when emergencies happen. Loans only go so far, but he is willing to do whatever it takes to realize his goal. He says,

Work, school, and relationships are such a balance. Taking the break helped me realize where my priorities were. School has to be a priority, so any free time I have I work on school stuff. Sometimes there is no time for relationships, friendships, or otherwise. There is work and school only. Using my time wisely is something I really try to accomplish.

Part of his struggle during his first few years was managing time.

Time management has always been a huge struggle. There are so many things to do. The professional education classes are a lot of work and they are not easy. I am a procrastinator and I think I work better under pressure. Math courses are my biggest struggle. I was good in math probably until 4th or 5th grade, but then it got harder and I just checked out. I don't think anyone thought I had a problem with math. I think I just slipped through the cracks. I don't like to ask for help, but I did use a tutor during college algebra. She helped me pass it. I told her to teach me like I didn't know anything.

He also credits his advisor for being so encouraging:

Mechelle is amazing. I didn't meet with her, other than times I had to. She was always there to help me. Making sure classes were going okay, I wasn't taking too many hours, I was transitioning well, and keeping me on track. My advisor is awesome; she is a great person. I didn't seek out help, but she knew she needed to keep an eye on me.

When asked what keeps him going, he says:

Personal motivators for me are former teachers and the kids I work with, for example Mr. Smith. He is always in the back of my mind. His attitude stays with me. He was always encouraging and challenging me. The kids and teachers at Bergman are huge as well. The kids are my biggest influence. On my refrigerator, I have drawings and notes from those kids to look at and motivate me every day. Even though I am not at Bergman any more I still keep in touch with the parents and the kids.





Hopefully one day soon I will be teaching them in either middle school or high school. When I told them that I was going to be a teacher for bigger kids they wanted to know if I could be their teacher.

When visiting Bergman Elementary for the film project, the kids treated him like a rock star! In the cafeteria he almost caused a riot when he arrived. Kids came up to him in droves wanting a hug. I believe the reason is his charming personality. He makes learning fun, he jokes with them, and yet he has a dominating influence on their behavior. You could also feel the adoration towards him from the staff. Many of the teachers at Bergman could not say enough about what a great person he is; you could tell the respect was mutual. Kris still keeps in contact with most everyone at the school.

Kris now wants to influence his younger brothers with what he has accomplished thus far. He wants to see them attend college and graduate. He even brings his brothers to campus for events so they can see what the life would be like. He is constantly encouraging them to do well in school. He doesn't want to stop there, he is such a role model for his "kids" at Bergman that is why he continues to visit them, to keep them motivated. He calls them his "kids" because he really feels invested in them. He states, "There are three classes of students that I keep track of. I come to visit them because I know one day they will be 'too cool' to want a hug. I have to get them while they are still young enough to want to do that!"

Kris: Voice of Support

 **Every Experience Makes You Who You Are: Kris**

Ciera's Story: Following Her Passion



When Ciera was asked why she chose to become a teacher, she struggled to provide a straightforward answer. Once hearing her story, it seems that she did not choose teaching, but rather teaching chose her. The winding path Ciera has taken to arrive in teacher education had many detours. Despite the fact that she has encountered many obstacles in her short 22 years of life, she says she "wouldn't change a thing."

Growing Up

Ciera, a bi-racial, white and African American female, was adopted at the age of two into an all-white, rural, working class family in Lyndon, Kansas. From the time she was very young, her parents recognized Ciera's intelligence. Ciera was a curious child and living in the country fostered her imagination and love of nature. She spent a great deal of her time roaming the banks of Pomona Lake, free to explore her interests. Ciera loved science and mathematics, but she struggled remaining focused in the traditional elementary classroom setting. However, with the assistance of her 2nd grade teacher, who differentiated instruction for Ciera, she was finally able to stay engaged and flourish in her schoolwork.



Ciera states:

If I got bored in class, like I said, I'd usually talk or get in trouble, and I had one teacher for second grade that actually was the first one to take the step and realize that I was different, realize that I wasn't really trying to get in trouble, but that I just doesn't have enough to do. She made sure that I had the tools I needed to reach my potential. And that's really what I believe set my groundwork for math... She's made sure that I kept being stimulated, I kept learning, and I wasn't just bored.

In the same year, Ciera was formally diagnosed with ADHD, and then was provided support in managing her special needs as a learner.



Ciera also was interested significantly in music and began playing the clarinet and the saxophone in honor of her father, who loved jazz. Identifying a strong correlation between math and music, Ciera was drawn to the patterns she saw in both areas. As a natural outlet for her

creative energies, Ciera developed a love for symphony music in particular. This led to her playing in and eventually leading a variety of assemblies throughout junior high and high school. For Ciera, music played a powerful role in her emotional and academic development. Not only did it teach her responsibility, leadership, and dedication, it also served as a medium through which she connected with her very musical father.



Navigating College

Although Ciera's parents were older and did not earn college degrees, they did see Ciera's potential. They decided early on that they needed to do everything they could to make sure she went to college. Ciera's mother encouraged her to attend a college close to their hometown; however, Ciera wanted the opportunity to leave home for college. While she had some early STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) enrichment experiences at K-State, Ciera applied to several out of state schools as well, with the hope of getting accepted to the University of Pennsylvania. When that didn't happen, she decided to attend K-State and major in engineering. Because her parents did not go to college, Ciera's pre-college preparation looked different than the preparation of many of the students who would surround her in the entry-level engineering courses at K-State.



As a FGC student, Ciera dealt with a great deal of uncertainty, as she attempted to navigate the complexities of college life while bearing the weight of her parents' expectations as the sole college student in their family. She remembers:

As a small-town girl living out in the country, never going to parties in high school, I came to college and realized that I could just go out and not have to ask permission. That was a little eye opening for me. I didn't know how to handle this and I made some poor decisions. But, I definitely learned from it... I had to learn how to balance academic life and studying. Realizing that I can't go out every night was a big challenge for me in the beginning.

Looking back now, Ciera indicates that one of her greatest difficulties was only tangentially related to the coursework of college. She states,

While I was clueless about how difficult the engineering program would be, mine really was more of an issue



of identity... I struggled with figuring out who I was, probably like most students my age. But as a first generation college student, you come into college without knowing what to expect. As I looked around at my peers, it seemed like they all had things figured out... Maybe they did, maybe they didn't... But it was clear from their comments and interactions that they were receiving messages from somewhere... It was like they were all tuned to a different frequency—one that I couldn't hear... I realize now what that was all about. As a first generation student you don't have specific guidance. You kind of have to fend for yourself and figure things out pretty quickly, or you go home...

As Ciera navigated these waves of emotions, she struggled settling on a major. She was in search of “her place” or “where she belonged” as a student and a professional.

As a child, Ciera felt that school came easily. While she struggled with managing her ADHD, she was able to maintain good grades while also being highly involved in extracurricular activities. She realized quickly, once she got to college that her academic success was a huge part of her identity. She shares,

One of my biggest struggles in college has been learning that [my] grades don't define who I am. I was very successful in high school. I got lots of help from friends and teachers. I did not recognize how much of a support system they were.

During her first two years at K-State, the social and academic isolation that Ciera was experiencing as a college student among thousands, weighed heavy on her. She chose to stay silent about her struggles for weeks, even months—as do many FGC



students. She did not want to worry her parents. At the time, she felt they “had enough to worry about” and she feared that they “wouldn’t understand.” Ciera felt an overwhelming sense of obligation to be successful; because her family believed in her so much, she couldn’t let them down. Ciera was going to have to figure this out on her own... At least that is what she thought.

Turning Point

After taking Calculus II three times and being on the brink of dismissal from the university, Ciera came to a hard realization. “I had to step up and out of my comfort zone and seek out help in order to get the most out of college. Realizing that I am *not alone* is huge. Everyone is here to help. Even my parents surprised me by their support.” This realization, just prior to her junior year, seems to have marked a turning point in many ways for Ciera. It was soon after this that she began to reflect deeply on her strengths and weakness, her current situation, and what she really wanted for her future.

As part of this process, Ciera indicates how important her professional experiences as a college student were in shaping her decisions at this critical time, “Once I acknowledged how unhappy I was in school, I decided to look at what else I was doing in my life, work-wise and activity-wise.” At the time, she was enjoying working as a private tutor several times a week. She also was working for a campus-based multicultural engineering enrichment program, which allowed her to go out to public schools and do STEM activities with children. As a result of her demonstrated leadership in this program, Ciera was asked to serve on a search committee for the university. Coincidentally, in her interactions with other search committee members, she was able to gain insightful advice and guidance from a STEM faculty member. After hearing Ciera’s story,

this professor ultimately encouraged her to go for what she was interested in, to follow her passion. As a result, Ciera experienced what she considers her greatest triumph to date, “realizing engineering wasn’t for me.”

When asked if she would do things differently, Ciera explains, “No, these experiences and challenges have shaped me and taught me so much about leadership. I have learned who I am, what I am good at, and where my passions lie.” It is clear that Ciera has found a home in the field of education and is comfortable with where this career choice might take her:

I love teaching. I love helping people. I am very positive in how I approach people. When I see students struggle, I am able to motivate students and let them know they are not alone. I want to help inspire students to accomplish all their goals. I should have known this earlier; others saw it in me in high school. I even won the Math Tower Award at Topeka High for my work tutoring a struggling student.

In this narrative Ciera embodies the type of mentor and the kind of support system she needed (and eventually found) during her first years as a college student. It also demonstrates her natural leadership capabilities.



Now anchored in the field of education, Ciera feels she is able to leverage all of her skills and interests in meaningful ways. During her short time in the College of Education, Ciera continues to demonstrate leadership. She began a student organization called MESO-STEM, which is a Multicultural



Education Student Organization focused in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education. In addition to organizing students, writing a constitution and by-laws, and establishing the organization as a formally recognized group on campus, she initiated several major outreach and recruitment projects to serve the college and local communities. She leads by example, and it is within this student group that Ciera provides and gains support, simultaneously.

Looking Forward



As she considers her long-term professional plans, there is a sense of anxious excitement in her voice and expressions. For Ciera, reflection on this future self is both frightening and promising. She says, “Eventually,

I want to be a college professor some day. I love the college atmosphere.” She demonstrates a level of resolve and commitment to this goal by saying, “I know it is difficult to do, but I want to accept the challenge of teaching at the college level. I see what professors do. I see the impact they have, and it is significant. I want to work in an administrative position ultimately, and now, that is what drives me.”

Ciera: Voices of Support

- ▶ Living With ADHD: Ciera’s Adoptive Parents
- ▶ The Joy of Adoption: Ciera’s Adoptive Parents
- ▶ Gifted: Ciera’s Adoptive Parents
- ▶ The Potential of a Child: Ciera’s Adoptive Parents

Angelica’s Story: *Por Mi Familia*



Angelica Villanueva’s smile could light up a room. She, among 20 other non-traditional students in the class, was determined to earn her college degree. They all looked at me, the instructor of the course,

with uncertainty and apprehension in their expressions. Yet, as I surveyed the classroom of women, I could also see a sense of purpose and a will to succeed deep in their eyes. They worked so hard, as if their very lives depended on it—because they did. You see, there are very few options, for the thousands of Latinos living in Dodge City, Kansas to earn a degree in education. In spite of these limitations, these 20 women were fortunate to be part of a special elementary education degree program for individuals who had completed two years of general education requirements at a community college in their remote region of Kansas.

As the largest teacher licensure program in the state, Kansas State University, is 230 miles from Dodge City. So the *AccessUS* program, a grant-based, distance-delivered, elementary education program, offered with temporary support from the Department of Education and the Kansas legislature, served as a vital pathway for these women to become teachers.

I understood their commitment. Many of them have family members and spouses who work long hours in one of the three large meat packing plants in the area. Several of these women

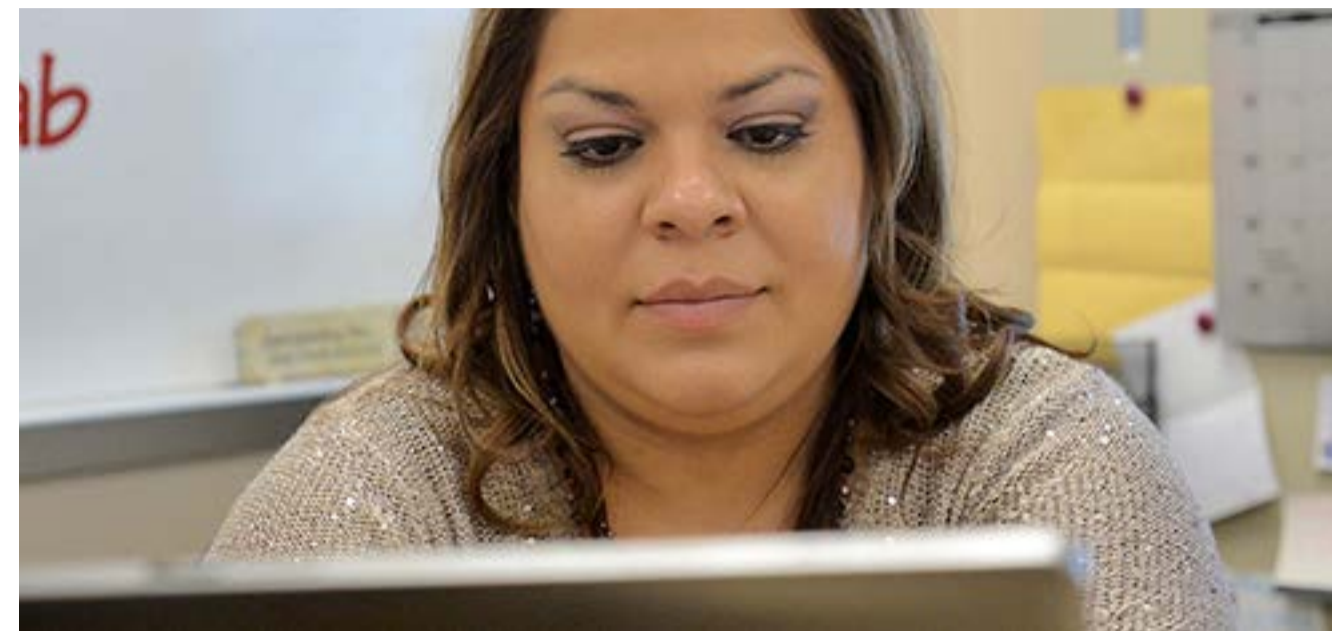




had worked at the plant themselves. They knew the hard life ahead of them in these positions, and they knew the only way to increase opportunities for their families was through education. So they were there. They were tired from juggling domestic duties as wives and mothers and from working long hours at their various jobs, but they were there.

This diversity course was a required course within the elementary education program and it provided students an opportunity to learn about the diverse perspectives and different cultures they would encounter as future teachers. It also served as a vehicle to explore students' own cultures and identities. Throughout the course, I asked them to respond to readings, poems, videos, and artwork via a series of critical reflections as journal entries. In these journal entries, they wrote their thoughts and feelings about their past and their future selves. The only requirement I had for these reflections was *honesty*.

For Angelica, honest reflection came easily. She is naturally thoughtful and often reflects on her life and all that she has to be thankful for. At times, Angelica wonders where she and her family would be, if not for the hard work and dedication of her father to provide a better life for them in America. Angelica recalls her struggles as an English Language Learner in school and how she dealt with teachers' low expectations and negativity towards her. She still feels the regret of her time being involved with gang activity and the despair she experienced until one teacher challenged her to be something more. This particular teacher saw Angelica's potential and continued to stay in contact with her throughout high school. Angelica remains grateful for the positive impact that this teacher had on her academic success in middle school. It is



Angelica's sense of gratitude for all her blessings that motivates her to succeed.

In her journal entries, Angelica painted a picture of her life. She used them to deconstruct and define her experiences as the daughter of immigrant parents, and an English Language Learner (ELL) student growing up in a minority-majority town in southwestern Kansas. Furthermore, as a young wife and mother, Angelica described her more recent difficulties juggling multiple responsibilities while being a full time student. Although the *AccessUS* program provided a highly valuable opportunity for her to get a degree, it stretched Angelica and the other women in her cohort. It required them to take a full 12 credit hour load each semester, despite the fact that they all had jobs. And given that many of them had not been in school for years in some cases and were relatively new to using technology, the learning curve was steep at times. Even though her older sister had attended college for some time, Angelica remembered just how much she didn't know about being successful in college. Navigating policies and procedures, developing study skills and managing time all caused great difficulty for her as a first generation college student. However, she continued to draw



strength from the caring relationships with family members, friends, advisors and teachers. It is through the narratives shared below that you as the reader can see her and her family's stories of struggle, strength and hope.

January 25th:



I am so tired. But I rarely ever complain. I know that my exhaustion cannot even begin to compare to the pain and fatigue that my father selflessly

endures for the family. My dad has worked at packing plants since he came to this country. A plant job is actually what caused us to move to Dodge City. For several years he worked under an alias. It was actually my uncle's name. For many of my friends, both of their parents worked at the plant. But my dad always wanted somebody to be at home so that all us kids went to school with clean clothes and food in our stomachs. He knew that as long as we were in class, we were clean, and never felt hunger, that we would do well in school. This was very important to him and my mom because they both were extremely poor in Mexico. My mom only completed up to the fourth grade in school, and my dad only went to second grade, but never for a full year. Despite this, I was never ashamed of my family. I looked up to my parents so much. We may have gone without a lot of material things growing up, but I know they did the very best that they could do for us.

February 18th:

Today, we read excerpts from a book that Gloria Anzaldúa first wrote in 1987 called, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Her writing is so powerful. So moving, that as I read, I was flooded with emotions and memories of my own “borderlands” experiences as a young girl.

In school, there were those teachers who if they saw I had a cut, they would put salt in it. Those teachers would always say, “Well, if you don't start paying attention or if you don't do this or that, you're just going to end up at the plant like your kind, like people in your family.” And to me that was very hard to hear just because my dad is my hero. They were saying that what my dad did was beneath society or worthless. But I knew from where he came and he was able to achieve a lot of things because of the packing plant. He didn't know how to read or write when he first came to the United States. But the plant gave him his first job here and paid him with a paycheck that he had to sign. So he had to learn to sign his name. I thought of my family's experiences when I read these words:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incomparable frames of reference causes 'un choque', a cultural collision. (p. 78)



The U.S-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. (p. 25)

Even though there were lots of teachers who discounted me and other Mexicans at my school, there also were wonderful teachers that really changed by life. My sixth grade teacher, Ms. Deges, pushed me and believed in me academically. I know I would not be where I am today, if not for her.

March 10th:

Today's discussion on immigration was difficult for me. But, learning about the statistics and the issues surrounding immigrant families and the role of schools is so important. As the child of immigrants, I am not sure where my family would be without amnesty. Thankfully, my dad, mom, and my older brother and sisters were able to get papers when I was young. This was so nice because we did not have to be afraid anymore. We could then go visit my family in Mexico for one or two weeks each year. But dad would make sure it was only during the time that we were off from school. He would never let us miss school days.

I want to be a role model for my son, just like my dad was for me. He has worked so hard and suffered so much to be where he is at and to have given my family all that it has. My dad always told me "Mija, I want you to do good in school and get your education." It is hard to see the sacrifices he's made, because he has worked at



the meat packing plant for 36 years and he spent 23 of those years working as a chuck boner and those are one of the hardest jobs. I know, because I worked out there for about eight months. He did not want me to be at the plant. He said, "Angelica, I have worked there as long as I have and suffered the pain, for you kids not to have to suffer."

Growing up, I wanted to be an attorney. But as I got older and realized the number of years it would take to get a law degree, I began to change my mind. When I told my dad about my concerns, he said, "Look mija, see how long I've worked out there? And when I leave there I'm not going to have anything. Nothing that allows me to say, 'Look I did this for something.' But after you finish those years in college you're going to have something that says, 'Look I studied this' and nobody can take that away from you."

April 2nd:

Some days, my high school and early college experiences seem like a lifetime ago. When I started taking classes



at the community college I was working at the beef packing plant and it was too much. It was November and I realized there was no way I was going to be able to keep up with three classes while working nights. So, I just quit going to class. At the time I just thought okay, they'll know I'm not going anymore, but I didn't know that there was a process for dropping courses. So now here I am with bad grades on my record. I did not have anyone to tell me hey you should go and drop because it's really going to affect you on your GPA, forever! It was little things like that or even knowing that I could talk to my teachers and say, "Look this is what's going on, what can I do?" I didn't know those things.

I have grown so much since then and learned a lot about navigating with the help of the *AccessUS* program. But I am still struggling with how to maintain good grades while working as family liaison at the school. I know I could not have made it this far without the support of my family as well. My husband is my biggest motivator, especially last semester.

I remember we were driving to Mexico right after my last final exam and I was so tired from being up all night again, studying. I told my husband, "I'm going to quit! I can't take it. I'm just not cut out for this." And he told me, "You know what Angelica, I might not go to school with you and I might not do your homework, but I have been here too and you haven't gotten to where you are to quit right now." At the time, all I wanted him to say is quit. But he told me "No. You're going to keep on going." I honest to God thought he was going to tell me just to quit because I knew he was tired of it too. By the end

of each semester, I know he is sick of having to eat out so much. I just don't have time to cook much anymore because I have to study or go to night class. He even does chores around the house when I need him to, like cleaning and watching mijo; especially when I ruptured my appendix and had an abscess on my leg last year. Because of him and my family, we were able to keep afloat.

April 23rd:

There have been so many times that people in my life could have given up on me, but they didn't. That is one of the things I tell the students I work with. "We all have bad days. I'm gonna have good and bad days. You're gonna have good and bad days." If the teachers that really touched my life, would have held a grudge against me over the bad things I did I wouldn't be where I'm at today. Thankfully, I had those teachers that forgave me and let me know that tomorrow was a new day and a new opportunity to start over.

So I will tell my students the same thing. "Tomorrow is a new day. When you come back the next day I'm not going to hold it against you but I expect better from you." And sure enough, I've had students hold me to this when problems arise. I had one student who I removed from class say some choice words to me when he left, but the next day he came in and said, "Miss, my day starts over today, right?" and I said yes. Then he responded with "I'm sorry for yesterday. Is it okay if I go sit down?" and I said, "Of course. Every day is a new day." I know some teachers, hold grudges against students and it was just downhill after that, there's no coming back from it. So



sometimes we need to learn to forgive just like the kids forgive us for our bad days.

It is clear, from Angelica's journal entries from the course, that she would have never made it without caring individuals in her life. And it is for this reason that she feels so strongly about supporting and advocating for her culturally and linguistically diverse students. She knows first-hand the obstacles students are up against when it comes to gaining an education. Her warmth and genuine approach to working with her students, demonstrates her commitment to making a difference in their lives. This commitment stems from her own powerful and complex story as an English Language Learner (ELL) over 25 years ago. As seen in her journal entries, she and her family have come a very long way.

For the past four years, Angelica has served as a physical earth science teacher in her hometown of Dodge City. Despite her family's modest beginnings in Kansas, all of her siblings are now college graduates or local business owners who are able to provide for their children and extended family. She is a true success story and the impact of Angelica's work as a teacher leader can be seen in the lasting relationships she has with her students.

Angelica: Voices of Support

- ▶ **Growing Up in Dodge City: Angelica's Parents**
- ▶ **The Immigrant Experience: Angelica's Parents**
- ▶ **Becoming a Teacher: Angelica's Parents**
- ▶ **Advice to Parents: Angelica's Parents**

Chuck's Story: A Letter to Coach Anderson

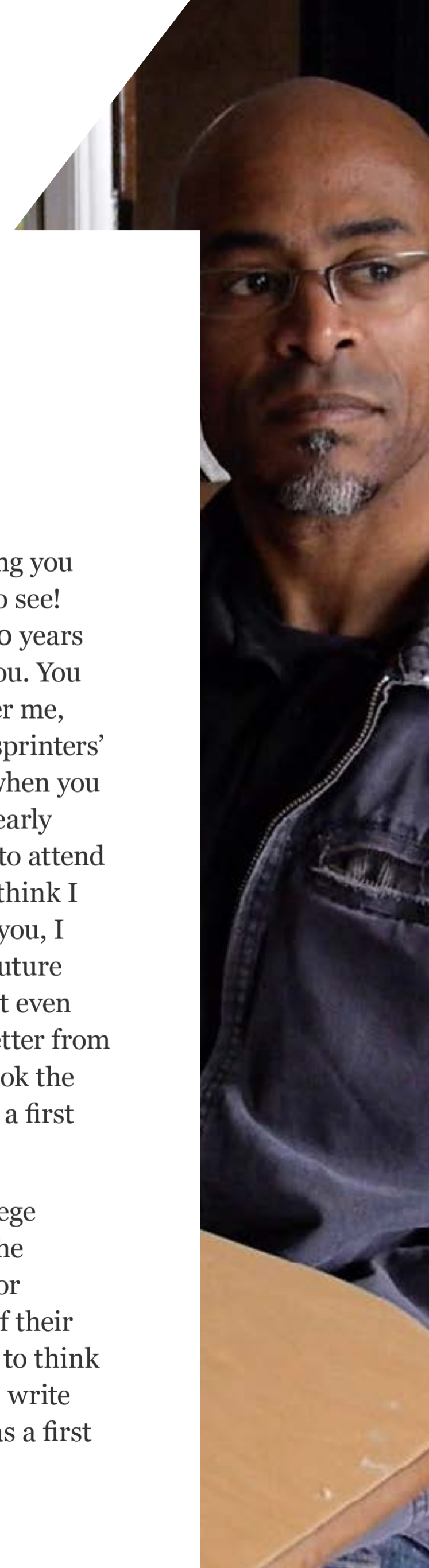
Dear Coach Anderson,



Hope life is treating you well. Long time no see! It's been almost 30 years since I first met you. You may not remember me, but you were the sprinters' coach at K-State when you

came to my house to recruit me as a track runner. I clearly remember the day when we signed the letter of intent to attend K-State with a track scholarship. Without you, I don't think I would have been able to go to college. Before meeting you, I didn't really think college was going to be part of my future because nobody in my family went to college. I had not even taken the ACT then. It wasn't until after I received a letter from K-State and you came to visit me at my house that I took the ACT. Thanks to your track scholarship offer, I became a first generation college student.

Recently, I had an honor to be interviewed by the College of Education at K-State. They were making a film on the experiences of first generation college students to honor their challenges and successes. I was selected as one of their interviewees, which gave me a wonderful opportunity to think back and reflect upon my past life. And I've decided to write you a 'thank-you' letter while flashing back to my life as a first





generation college student. I was a class of 1990 in graphic design and I received my second degree in education in 1997. But if I tell you my stories, you may remember who I am. You will understand how much I appreciate you for what you did for me and I hope you'll be proud of me for the person I have become.



I grew up with a brother and a sister with a single mom. Youngest of the three, I was pretty mischievous and got into my fair share of trouble. In fact, I was defiant to teachers who tried to exercise authority over

me. I used to tell teachers that “You’re not my father,” meaning that they were not the authority. To me, my father, who left mom when we were very young, was the only authority that I knew of. My defiant attitude got me in a lot of trouble even in high school. My secret desire was to have a father figure. Although we had plenty of love from our mom, I wanted to be loved by my father, who didn’t really exist in my family life. Growing up, I really didn’t have the sense of direction and discipline, especially from an adult male that I needed.

My poor mother, who struggled to raise us as best as she could on her own while working as a secretary at IBM, didn’t talk much about education with us because she herself struggled in schools. She didn’t read very well. She never went to college, needless to say. But she provided us with a loving environment. She made sure that we were in school, we were respectful of others, and we weren’t getting into trouble. She knew school

was important but didn’t see it as a means for success. So going to college was not part of our conversation. So, Coach Anderson, if it were not for you and the track scholarship, I don’t know if I would have made it to college, and I don’t know what I would be doing now if I didn’t.

Did I tell you how I got into running track in high school? I didn’t start it until my junior year. It happened by accident. In our gym class one day, we were doing the 50-meter dash and I beat this kid, Kenny, who was one of the fastest kids in the school. My friend Harry, who was so proud of me said, “Man, you gotta run track. You have to, I mean, you MUST run track.” It was the best advice. So, I started running track that year, my junior year. And the Lord blessed me with speed. Because of that, I got a chance to have a visit from you and go to K-State.

I still remember how tough it was to be in college. I was not prepared at all for the rigor of academics in college. Because I didn’t pursue higher-level courses in high school, I wasn’t ready for college. Naturally, I struggled in college. I struggled tremendously. I didn’t think I belonged there. I was even on probation my first year because of low grades. I didn’t know how to study. I didn’t know the importance of note taking. Again, a lot of that had to do with the fact that I didn’t have anybody before me who had gone to college to teach me specific things that I should be getting ready for. It took me a while to learn how to study and how to take notes. I learned that by watching others who usually sat at the front in classroom.

I didn’t feel that professors were approachable. They were, in fact, intimidating. A lot of professors didn’t look like me; they were mostly White, so I didn’t feel like they would understand me, who I am, and where I came from. However, there was one Black male professor in the College of Education, to whom



I went to quite often. I felt comfortable going to him because I knew he would open his door for me, welcoming me. It was my privilege to be able to go see him whenever I needed. It was important for me especially as a first generation college student, who didn't have the privilege of having a parent who's been to college, to be able to go and speak to a professor of color, when the majority of professors on campus were not minority.

Another thing that caused me the greatest stress in college was money or the lack of money, I should say. Even though I was on a scholarship, it was a partial scholarship and I still had to find a way to eat or to pay for my bills. Many times I was preoccupied with the worry about money in classes, thinking how I was going to pay a particular bill or how I was going to get the money to go with my friends to do things. These worries had a great effect on my schoolwork because I couldn't give my full attention to the academics because of the thought of the things that I couldn't get for my classes, such as art supplies that I needed for my graphic design major.

However, one thing I did know was that college was an opportunity; an opportunity that was not given to a lot of people of color in my poor neighborhood. I knew I had an opportunity to do something that a lot of kids in my neighborhood would or could never do. I had friends who were in jail. But I didn't want to be like them. So, I knew that I wanted to succeed whatever the struggles were. It was important for me to move forward. I knew I had to endure and persevere. It's like going through a storm. I didn't want to run away from the storm. I had to face it and go through it to be able to become the person I want to be. And I know those storms are the ones that made me who I am now.

So, I worked hard in college to succeed. I graduated from college. I needed a job, but I didn't want to come back to Kansas City, especially Wyandotte County where I grew up because there was constant violence, gun shooting, and other bad things happening among my people, African Americans, living in the county. I didn't want to deal with them. I wanted to separate myself from them. But my goals changed dramatically once I got a job at the county juvenile detention center, which is a job that my stepfather introduced me to. It didn't take long for me to realize that I was supposed to work with those kids at the juvenile center. Maybe in a couple of weeks after working there, my heart started to change for them, realizing that it was not them but the environment they were in was what put them in the juvenile detention center. They were just unfortunate. Their circumstances, like the family dynamics, the neighborhood, the guns, the drugs, whatever it was, were the problem. I mean, most of those kids there had one of their parents who were either upstairs in the county jail or in another penal system, state penitentiary or federal penitentiary. How are they supposed to know anything better?





I knew that if those kids were put around different people, if we could show them a different, better way to live, their lives would be different. I knew that I couldn't blame the kids any more. My heart stated to change. Rather than focusing on myself, I decided to focus on them. I knew I had to do something for them. I, too, used to feel that I would never get out of trouble, poverty, not only material poverty but also emotional poverty. I was not confident in myself. I used to think that no matter how hard I tried I would never be successful. I was pretty much hopeless. Remembering those times, my past self, I didn't want to see those kids grow up with the same mentality I used to have. I needed to help them overcome it by modeling for them.

God directed me to a good path. I am now the founder and director of the Urban Scholastic Center and pastor of Servant Community Church, married for 21 years with four children. My students are mostly African Americans from low-income families. They are not academically or scholastically ready to go to college. So, the 'scholastic' piece is important because we have to get them academically prepared on a high level. We take them to college campuses, help them understand why math is important in high school (for college algebra), things like that. I know that not everyone has to go to college in order to be a great person but going to college will help an individual to be prepared for future advances.

I consider what I do at the Urban Scholastic Center an investment in a life of a kid who doesn't have much. I try to plant the seed of the power of positive and affirming words in the heart of each child. No one knows how deep the seed will go and how powerful the return will be. I tell my students, "You never allow a teacher to let you slide by. No matter how much they like you or how much you like them because that's



not what's preparing you for life after high school. That may get you through high school, but it's not preparing you for the responsibility that you will have when you leave high school." I want my students to be responsible adults once they leave my school building. So, I encourage my students to take difficult classes, take difficult teachers, and work hard, because that's what the real world is about.

Coach Anderson, you helped me be a runner; the fastest runner I could be. You helped me succeed as a track star. You helped me stay on the right track. Now, I am trying to help my students get on and stay on track, metaphorically. They need to have a vision of where they want to be. Then, they will know if they are on the right track. It's like imagining being on a train track. If they know where they are going, their destination, then they will know whether they are on the right train or not. If they are on the right one, they will be happy, even during those times when the train veers and sways. That's the analogy I use when I teach my students to have a goal or a destination.



Coach Anderson, as you can see, my goal in life is to help disadvantaged students, especially young African Americans, to go to college because of the struggles I had myself as a person of color. Please know that I am indebted to you for providing me with the opportunity to go to college and be successful. I am paying you back through my dedication and commitment to the next generation of students who, otherwise, might miss the opportunity of being successful.

Yours Truly,

Chuck Allen

Director of Urban Scholastic Center

Chuck: Voice of Support

 **It Takes a Village: Chuck**

Martin's Story: Paying it Forward



Martin Segovia is a success story. Ask anyone who works with him or has known him since he was a little boy. He grew up in Garden City, Kansas and was known for his athletic skills especially in wrestling. He is currently an assistant principal, activities director, and athletic director at

Garden City High School. Garden City is situated in southern Kansas. The largest employer in Garden City is Tyson Foods. The second largest employer is the school district.

Martin is an alumnus of Kansas State University's Educational Administration program and he received his undergraduate degree at University of Nebraska at Kearney on a wrestling scholarship. Despite his time away for college, Martin is a southwestern Kansas kid through and through. Garden City is rich in diversity but, in Martin's day it was a little more segregated, however he still had some rich experiences. One such experience was cutting through Mr. Al Reed's yard. He recalls Mr. Reed yelling at him. The next time he saw him he put him to work mowing the grass. Even after he went to college he still mowed the yard for Mrs. Reed.

And I remember one day Mr. Reed yelling at me, "Hey boy, why are you cutting through my yard?" Well, he started putting me to work. And for a quarter, I would dump his trash. And eventually, I was about 10 at the





time. And he has photos of me pushing a lawnmower not from the top bar, but from the lower bar. And I used to mow the lawn for him. And he used to have a hedge right here and I had to trim his hedges all the time. And then he passed away. And so, I would come and take care of Mrs. Reed and do the yard and the upkeep and things. I would come see her when I was off at college and come home and see her for Christmas and things. I grew up here, born and raised in Garden City, Kansas. My mother and father divorced when I was three. So I never really met my real dad. Still to this day, I never shook his hand, or knew him, other than the vague memories I have when I was three-years-old. But, when I was eight, my stepfather came into my life. This was a big change, to go from not having a male figure in my life to having a step-dad who established a lot of rules for me. I also had eight brothers and sisters and stepbrothers and sisters who grew up with me. It was a good upbringing, but it was sometimes difficult with that many mouths to feed.



Because of this, Martin and his siblings did not have lofty expectations for himself after high school. Martin did not know that college was even obtainable for him until his senior year. He didn't even think college was an option, but he just happened to have some people around

him who made it possible. They cared about him and they saw something in him that he didn't see in himself.

I went to college on accident. I was at football practice in the fall with one of my colleagues now, Brad Springston, and he asked me "Are you taking the ACT tonight, the practice ACT?" I said, "What are you talking about?" He says, "Yeah, they're serving free pizza in the library if you want to come." I said "I'm there!" So I went and signed up for a test I knew nothing about. I was getting information that was just way over my head; from college entrance exams to the ACT to FAFSA, all these acronyms that I just didn't know. I didn't even know what a college credit hour was. I signed-up for the ACT exam, and found out I could actually take the ACT for free just by signing the back page of the information packet. So it paid my \$25 waiver. I didn't break any records on the ACT. At the time, in order for a student athlete to get into an NCAA institution he had to have a 16. I scored a 17. So, low and behold next thing I knew, programs were contacting me and asking me if I'd like to come and compete for their university or college.

Martin was fortunate enough to have people around him who supported him. Lydia Gonzalez was one of those people. She helped him fill out all the paperwork and made sure his parents supplied all the needed documentation. Another big supporter was his wrestling coach Rocky Welton. Martin states:

My high school wrestling coach, Rocky Welton, sat me down one busy Saturday evening, as a senior you think you can't miss any social gathering going on, but he made me sit down at his house one Saturday night, and I wore my pencil out with all the bubbling and circling



in that I did for scholarships and it paid dividends. I had to turn money away. I stayed at Garden City Community College for one year and the Jayhawk Conference didn't allow me to have that much money, so I had to actually give money back. So I had qualified for so many scholarships that he had helped me look up, find and then obviously apply for.



MEDAL WINNER — Buffalo junior Martin Segovia tangles with David Peter of Washburn Rural in the 120-pound consolation finale during the Class 1A state tourney in Wichita Saturday.
Segovia leads Buffs with bronze at state

His parents were huge supporters as well. They had difficulty going to events and other things due to work, but they were always very supportive, excited, and proud. “I was the first person in my family out of all my brothers and sisters and my parents to graduate from high school, let alone college. It was big and they were very proud of me.” For me, getting into college was the easy part. It was staying in college that became the challenge. Martin recounted his experience in this way:

It was a little bit of a culture shock for me. I arrived on campus and there were only seven Latinos on the whole campus at the time. So, talk about sticking out like a sore thumb! I definitely did, and I was different because I came from a culture of eating papas and tortillas and things like that for breakfast, and going there it was just totally opposite. Fortunately, I met a great buddy of mine. David Carino, who is a long-time coach, is still one of my best friends today. But in college, he was just there; he'd already spent a year prior to me at the college, so he had already experienced a lot of it. For me, the

buddy system worked wonderfully for the university setting because David helped me adapt to what I was getting ready to step into. It wasn't that people were malicious or mean to me; it was just different.

When asked if he had wanted to give up he said, “several times.” He wanted to give up, he missed home, he missed his parents and family. He recalls packing up at night and trying to leave, but his friend and roommate would not let him go anywhere.

There were times where I just wanted to give up and come home. I can recall packing at night and my buddy David telling me “You're not going anywhere.” He wouldn't let me leave you know, things like that. But it was definitely a journey, well worth the pain. At first it was really tough even just to come home. However, when I would get back to Garden City, it was a big welcome party. People were welcoming you and you miss the faces and the warmth. I didn't miss it as much as time went on. I started getting used to the college system, and just the friendships and the people you meet. There are so many wonderful people outside of your own zip code, it's amazing that once you branch out, you take off, and you see what's out there. It's awesome, and I wish every kid and student could experience that... because there are a lot of wonderful people out there.

Another huge theme in Martin's college life was community support. He had help from not only the emotional support from his parents, but also often times monetarily from others in the community.

Dr. Zeller was another big influence in my life, and I remember being there at the university. It was



about my sophomore year, and it's tough. My parents didn't contribute a whole lot financially to my college education; they didn't have to. I didn't break a record on the ACT, but when I got to university I started doing well academically and athletically, so I was receiving pretty good compensation there for books, tuition and all that for attending the university. But the day-to-day grind of just finding food and getting fuel and all those things was tough.

Dr. Zeller was so huge and instrumental in helping me, and I don't know why he adopted me in a sense, but he did. I remember one time coming home, checking the mail. It was always exciting because we didn't have email or cellphones, so we waited for the mail. I got a letter from Dr. Zeller and I still have it to this day. I have several of them. He wrote me a letter about how proud he was of me and just to keep pushing forward and doing the best I could and that if there was anything I needed, he would be there. He included a check for \$100 and said, "Go have dinner on me somewhere." He would do those types of things for me, and I don't know why, myself, but I guess he just felt like paying it forward. He would tell me that, pay it forward.

Also, that summer as I was coming home for summer break, I got into a car accident. I wrecked my car and totaled it. When it was time to go back to school, I was waiting for my best friend, David, to come pick me up on his way from Amarillo to head to school, back to the university. Dr. Zeller called me. He said, "I see you got into a car wreck. I want you to go down to Western Motor and pick out a vehicle." I said, "Oh I can't afford

that." I didn't expect anything from anyone or anything, but he told me, "No, I mean it. I want you to go down there and pick out a car. You can pay me later." When I arrived there I find out that he had already talked to the dealership so they allowed me to pick out a car and he paid for it.



As I loaded my new vehicle to head back to school I thanked him all I could! The very next summer I came back with the intention, obviously, of starting to pay him back. I spent about four or five weeks going to see him, weekly. I was making a small paycheck at Western Irrigation, putting in sprinkler systems. Each week, I'd take him some money and about the fifth time I went to his house, he said, "Why do you keep coming over and giving me money?" I said, "Well I have to, I have to repay this debt I owe you." He said, "Well, you can stop paying me now. Because what you will do in your future will invest in kids ten times the value of this vehicle." So, still today, I feel I owe him so much. I talk to him all the time on the phone. It's always a joy to hear from him. He was just a huge support for me and I don't think I could have done it without him.

Many first generation students need more than just emotional, financial, and academic support. Many times students need to find that intrinsic motivation to keep going.



The keys for me graduating from college were real simple. It was goal setting. I was taught in high school the importance of setting your goals, working hard, and reaching the bar where you want to be. In college, it was the same thing. I used to take my girlfriends' lipstick at the time, and I would write on my mirror, "Martin Segovia, national champion." So every day when I woke up that was the first thing I would see in big red lipstick. And every evening before I went to bed the last thing I would see is, "Martin Segovia, national champion." Those were the types of things I would do for myself in college. Graduating from college was huge, that was a big goal for me, because I was going to be the first, so I couldn't let people down. I used constant reminders to get me through. And I would say that to my college coach, Dr. Scantling, who was the Dean of Education. He was a great support to me because he would check on things for me. He made sure that I was gonna make it and wasn't struggling academically. He made sure I had everything in line to stay on track.

Another big theme that Martin stressed was that of leaving and coming home. Some first generation students do not go back home while others have every intention of returning to their hometowns and giving back to their communities. He states:

You can leave and you can always return. That's a big one. I'm home, I'm where I wanna be, and I'm back in my hometown doing what was done for me, and I think kids need to know that – that you can always come home. Leaving is a big jump, but if you're prepared, if you focus on it, it's definitely possible. My brothers and sisters would tease me quite a bit; call me the college boy



and things like that. But those were my older siblings. I'm number four, but my younger siblings actually graduated from high school, started going to community college and finished their degrees and things like that. And it was pretty neat to see that, that they were following my footsteps in a sense, and knew that they could do it. Even without the financial support that we couldn't afford.

Martin likes to keep this a secret, but he is always paying it forward. He continually tries to help by being a role model for students. He is also involved in giving in other ways such as donating used items, such as washing machines and old athletic equipment to people in Mexico. This motto for life can be seen in these words:

In this profession daily, you're giving back; you're always looking for the next "self." I'm always looking for the next Martin, and there are a lot of them out there, so I wish there were more of me to go around, because I



enjoy doing what I do. But I keep that in the back of my mind all the time, I owe, I owe, I owe. So...

No matter what he has been through, Martin's selfless nature will always make him successful.



Martin: Voice of Support

- ▶ **Kindness Counts: Martin**
- ▶ **If You Set Something Free (Advice to Parents): Martin**

Findings

Each of these short stories of the eight individuals presented here represents just a small portion of their rich life experiences. Their stories are ongoing. In the meantime, in order to have an understanding of the FGC students' experiences of going to college to become teachers, we reconstructed stories based on the interviews using a technique called "narrative smoothing" (Spencer, 1986) in which narrative rules of *focus-omission-selection-interpretation* were employed. Although our participants provided a broad range of equally compelling life stories, we focused primarily on the challenges and triumphs along their paths to become teachers for the purpose of this project. Through narrative smoothing, we retold our participants' stories to help the reader make sense of their complex life experiences. We hope that each story has given you a snapshot of who they are and who they are becoming as future teachers and experienced teachers.

As indicated by Petty (2014), much research on first generation college (FGC) students focuses on the many barriers that keep FGC students from being successful in college. Those barriers include:

- FGC students are nearly four times more likely to leave higher education institutions without a degree than their counterparts;
- FGC students attend college less than full time and are less involved in college activities due to personal reasons;
- FGC students tend to have multiple roles between the two



opposite worlds, the culture of home and the culture of higher education;

- FGC students have to bear the unfortunate title of low-income family situation and low-income families struggle to understand the benefits of graduating from college; and
- FGC students have unclear expectations of college, poorer academic abilities, lack of self-esteem, psychologically less prepared for college.

However, we argue that these identified barriers are grounded in the deficit model of thinking and reinforce the stereotypical ideas against FGC students (Gorski, 2005; Valencia, 1998; Valencia & Black, 2002; Valencia & Solórzano, 1998). As a result, blame is placed on the students themselves for their lack of success while the lack of effective support systems in higher education remains unchallenged (Bennett, McWhorter, & Kuykendall, 2006). In contrast, our participants' stories reveal *counter stories* that defy these barriers. The following emergent themes evidenced in the stories show that contrary to the common beliefs about FGC students, our participants:

- 1) Receive strong emotional support and encouragement from their parents and/or family members, which fostered their success in reaching college to better their lives.
- 2) Embrace their life obstacles and use them as funds of knowledge to become effective teachers.
- 3) Possess extraordinary empathy for and commitment to their students.

In the section to follow, we describe these themes in detail, providing excerpts as illustrations.

Strong Emotional Support and Encouragement

In relation to the first theme, participants demonstrated their motivation to succeed in college and life not necessarily because a teacher or administrator imposed those expectations on them. While teachers played an important role in fostering their resilience, students gained strength to succeed primarily from their family members (biological or adopted), who did not have a college education. As seen across all participants' stories, family members showed support by making significant sacrifices in order for their child/grandchild/sibling to get a quality education. For example, Helene's brothers, Vietnamese immigrants who are working as nail technicians, provide mental and emotional support for Helene's college education, which becomes the most valuable resource for Helene. She would not have gone to college without her two older brothers' insistence. She thought she was going to work at the nail salon with her family to help them out, but she had brothers who said, "No you're not. We don't want you to touch people's feet for a living...We want you to get an education and get further than we have, so that your children will get further than you have."

As seen with Lisa, she wanted to succeed as a teacher because she hoped to fulfill the unrealized dream of her late mother. She said, "So, in a way, my being a teacher would make my mom's dream come true," and she adds, "I don't wanna give up, because if I do, I will let my people down. I want to do something with my life that I'm going to love, which is to help other people." In the same way, Jessica's mother played a large role in shaping her college aspirations. The encouragement that Jessica received prior to enrolling in college wasn't spoken, but



she intuitively knew her parents desired it for her. Because her mother had such extreme struggles academically, she stood as a strong reminder for Jessica of the value of education.

Ciera's parents realized her potential when Ciera was quite young. While they were older and had not attended college, they began to save every bit they could to assist her in paying for college. They encouraged her and continued to believe in her ability to succeed at anything she does. While Kris did not have his parents in his life much as a child, his relationship with his grandma had a profound impact. She and his grandfather took Kris in and cared for him even though they were quite elderly. Kris and his grandmother were very close and he loved her deeply. Ultimately, Kris served as her primary caregiver once she developed cancer. During this trying time, Kris grew up quickly but he appreciated all that she did for him.

Although Martin's parents could not provide the monetary and logistical support for college, his parents were always supportive of him emotionally. They were supportive of everything he was trying to do, even though they did not attend many academic or athletic events because they worked long hours. They were very proud of Martin attending and graduating from college.

Chuck's mother, a single parent working to provide for him and his siblings, possessed great strength. She held high expectations for Chuck, instilling in him the importance of respect and faith. It is these life lessons that guided his steps and influenced Chuck's decision-making as a young adult, which ultimately led to his success in college.

Angelica's father and mother were extremely supportive. Though they were not able to support her financially in college, they were her "rock," serving as role models, and demonstrating

hard work and dedication. Angelica's parents were not able to finish elementary school; however, her dad would make sure that Angelica and her siblings were always well dressed, well fed, and well prepared for school. He was careful to plan their trips to visit family in Mexico; never allowing trips to infringe on the children's school schedule. Angelica remembers him telling her 'Mija, I want you to do good in school and get your education.'

As indicated above, the notion that low-income, working class families do not value education is challenged through the stories of our participants' families, as the majority consider college the pathway to a better life for their children; one that extends beyond their existing socially and racially marginalized positions.

Life Obstacles as Funds of Knowledge

The second theme, leveraging *life's obstacles as funds of knowledge*, can be seen in participants' ability to apply their cultural and experiential understandings in educational contexts. Lisa knows what hardship and heartbreak look and feel like. She was left with little family or support after her mother died, which is why she understands how critical a support system is to student success. She developed a powerful will to achieve her goal of becoming an effective teacher.

Helene demonstrates her ability to thrive, despite her families' challenges. She describes how her early experiences in a highly diverse, poor community in Los Angeles developed her sense of self and acceptance of diversity. Helene explains despite the wide range of cultures and languages, "everyone felt that they were in the same boat—being immigrants" and that "English was the common denominator." Therefore, she has always



viewed speaking another language as a positive aspect of her heritage.

For Ciera, her curiosity and early love for learning has served as her most powerful asset. Despite her learning disability, Ciera has found ways to push through obstacles, implementing strategies to keep herself focused and moving forward academically. As a result, she is a highly effective tutor. She was able to transform her struggle into strength, being able to connect with a wide range of students.

Jessica was also no stranger to learning challenges. Throughout her childhood, she watched her mother struggle with illiteracy and Jessica saw the limitations that her mother's inability to read placed on her as an adult and a parent. Furthermore, because her father also did not attend college, she felt alone in the college going process. However, despite this, Jessica was able to lead the way for her family. Figuring out how to navigate the process alone developed in Jessica tenacity and a sense of ownership of her future, which has allowed her to persevere through college.

Due to the onset of his grandmother's illness, Kris had to take on significant responsibilities, learning to access and coordinate resources as well as how to manage time while going to school. Despite the difficulty that this caused him at such a young age, he now looks back on that experience with appreciation, knowing he developed a great number of life skills that benefit him now as a student and a teacher.

As evident in Angelica's story, she used her childhood experiences as an ESL student and the daughter of immigrants from Mexico to her advantage in the classroom. As a result, she is able to relate to her Latino students' families and to

effectively identify and address the language learning needs of her ESL students in ways that other teachers often can't.

Martin indicated that the key for him being successful in college was real simple. It was goal setting. More specifically, it was his experiences as an athlete that developed the use of this strategy. While he was naturally gifted in athletics, he was taught in high school to establish goals and to work hard, always setting the bar where he wanted to be. This discipline that was fostered through the challenges set for him as an athlete continued to serve him well on into college and adulthood.

In Chuck's case, while he initially wanted to run from his past, he realized later that his experiences growing up in Wyandotte County provided him with a *nuanced lens* to see the struggles of the youth living in those communities differently than most people from outside Wyandotte. He also found that he had *social capital*, given his relationships and history in the community, which allowed him to make a greater impact on the students and families he worked with.

Empathy for and Commitment to Students

The third theme, demonstrating *extraordinary empathy and commitment* is evident in participants' authentic compassion for students, families and communities in need. As in the case of Ciera, she feels that all the familial and academic challenges she experienced have contributed to her ability to relate to students when they struggle. As a tutor she sees her own struggles reflected back at her in the students she works with.

For Lisa, who lost her single parent mother in a car accident when she was 4 years old, her role as a teacher is more of a calling than a profession. She has a "soft spot" for children



with a troubled past. Lisa desires to emulate the kindness and profound generosity that her adopted father showed her.

Helene, given the complex role that schooling played in her life, wants to be a beacon of hope, particularly for English Language Learners. She plans to do everything in her power to give students and families who are ELLs a chance at educational success. Helene believes that she has the power to support and effectively teach students so “they don’t feel so discouraged when they don’t understand English.”

As a paraeducator in the classroom, Kris revels in the admiration of his students. He cherishes the drawings and notes from his elementary students now and he genuinely looks forward to the time when he has his own classroom and can make an even bigger impact in the lives of students. As a future high school teacher, Kris hopes to share his passion for history as he inspires his students’ to consider the past in order to better understand their future.

For Jessica, she wants to be the kind of teacher that pushes students to dream bigger and work harder. She is dedicated to helping students understand all that is out there for them, if they just keep trying. Whether it is college or vocational school, she believes students should always continue to do better and to try.

For Angelica, she sees the fear and uncertainty in the eyes of her newcomer high school students. Whether they are struggling with relationships, home life, or academics, she remembers how difficult her and her siblings’ experiences were in school as they tried to adjust to a new school system, a new culture, and a new language. Therefore, Angelica tries to treat each student as if he/she was her brother or sister. Similarly,

Chuck’s earnest desire is to guide young people on the pathway that leads to their greatest potential. He spends a great deal of time at the Center pushing students to see bigger and broader than their current situation. He challenges them to take ownership of their learning and their future because he has extremely high expectations for their success.

Despite Martin’s long time in the field of education, he continues to *pay it forward*. He knows how hard it is to be the first. He sees the extreme need of the students in his school and is always looking for the “next Martin” who needs someone to reach out and invest in him/her. He realizes all the support and the opportunities that he was given as a young FGC student, and he daily tries to pay that forward to others.

As the eight individuals articulate the challenges and the successes they have had on their journeys to becoming teachers, one can sense a profound strength in their narratives. In the following section, we will discuss the ways in which the compelling stories that these pre-service and in-service teachers tell and retell have profound implications for teacher education.



Implications and Conclusions

Valuing FGC Students' Funds of Knowledge

As we mentioned earlier, much research indicates that first generation college (FGC) students are understood with the deficit theorizing perspective. Underlying in deficit theorizing is that FGC students' low success rate is a result of a plethora of inadequacies, such as inadequate resources and support from home, inadequate motivation, and inadequate self-identity (Hogg, 2011). This perspective has typically been used to characterize low-income, students of color, or other marginalized group of students as *deficient* in their social and cultural backgrounds. In this perspective, it is the students that are blamed for their unsuccessful college experience while the lack of institutional support systems remains unquestioned. However, the stories of our participants serve as counter stories to the deficit ideology, helping us rethink what it means to be a first generation college student. Further, they help us rethink ways to systematically support first generation college students whose dream is to educate future generations of students.

First, as shown in our research findings, our participants share stories that are different from what is commonly heard regarding the role of FGC students' families in their successes or lack thereof. Their stories reveal that challenging life experiences, extended family support, and their local culture, have become invaluable resources for their motivation to do well, and contributed to developing their funds of knowledge. Their funds of knowledge coming from their life experiences need to be recognized as assets, or as their *capital*, not as

deficiencies or hindrances (Hedges, 2012). Funds of knowledge are defined as the “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 72). In this notion, the wealth of students' lived experience is regarded as “funds” that students who are aspiring to be teachers resort to in becoming effective teachers, which cannot be overlooked. Hence, the concept of funds of knowledge that FGC students possess challenges the deficit theorizing perspective while offering a new conceptual framework for understanding FGC students whose stories need to be honored and valued with dignity.

Lunenberg and Korthagen (2009) suggest that teachers' funds of knowledge can be used to develop professional knowledge and to explore the processes of teacher education and professional learning. Our participants' stories offer us an opportunity to rethink how beneficial FGC students' funds of knowledge can be in developing their professional knowledge; linking experience, theory and practical wisdom in teaching.

Second, our participants' funds of knowledge worked as a foundation for their *narrative imagination*. According to Nussbaum (1998), narrative imagination is:

the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. (p. 11)

As shown in our research findings, the eight FGC students show their ability to put themselves in the shoes of others and become capable of compassion for those in need. Compassion,



according to Nussbaum (1997), “involves the recognition that another person, in some ways similar to oneself, has suffered some significant pain and misfortune in a way for which that person is not, or not fully, to blame” (p. 90-91). Through the funds of knowledge, our participants develop compassion that requires “a sense of one’s own vulnerability to misfortune” (p. 91), just like their own misfortune.

Third, the empathy and compassion that our participants possess are invaluable teacher dispositions that are fundamental for becoming effective teachers. These dispositional factors are particularly significant in determining teachers’ readiness. According to Garmon (2004), if pre-service and in-service teachers are not “dispositionally ready” to become teachers, “even the best-designed teacher preparation programs may be ineffective” (p. 212). Hence, Haberman (1996) argues that teacher education programs in particular need to carefully consider what *value* they place on these disposition-related characteristics when engaged in both the student recruitment/selection process as well as the preparation process. As seen from our research findings, FGC students have the advantage of possessing the kind of teacher dispositions necessary to help teacher preparation programs effective.

Fourth, valuing FGC students’ funds of knowledge is not enough. FGC students historically have received inadequate school support to go to college and stay in college. These students need a great deal of guidance and support from educational institutions, high school and beyond—especially at key junctures on their path to a college degree. While we echo existing literature that speaks to the need for institutional support to be embedded and integrated into the infrastructure of university policies, we also argue that institutions must shift

their focus. They must foster a climate that moves FGC students from risk to resilience.

One way to do so is by providing *differently-focused* professional development, which utilizes FGC students’ funds of knowledge, both for the administrators/faculty/staff who work with FGC students as well as for the FGC students themselves. As our students’ stories indicate, identity development and managing the responsibility of being the “first” was a significant weight to bear. Focused professional development that assists students in understanding their shifting and emerging identities within the context of higher education could give them an outlet to discuss their experiences with others as well as provide them with context to understand they are not alone in their struggles. This type of professional development should be designed to equip them with the tools to leverage, and the lens to understand, their own experiences as *capital*.

Similarly, administrators, faculty and staff must learn to see FGC students with new eyes. When educational institutions are committed to an *asset-perspective* towards FGC students, it is evident throughout their policies as well as in their hiring and training procedures. By fostering an asset-perspective in all they do, high schools and universities can create a campus culture that embraces FGC students’ nuanced backgrounds and holds high expectations for their success. As a result, students are able to rise above their own expectations. In summary, FGC students, when appropriately and comprehensively supported within a positive, professional learning environment, are able to bring to bear their valuable (experiential, cultural, and dispositional) funds of knowledge to become effective teachers.



Campus Voices

Selected video clips available on the [companion website](#)

Advice on Succeeding

- ▶ **K-State First Generation Programs: Dr. Steve Dandaneau**
- ▶ **K-State First Generation Mentoring: Dr. Pat Bosco**
- ▶ **Ask Questions... Lots of Questions: Dr. Amanda Morales**
- ▶ **Skills Needed for College: Dr. Amanda Morales**

What Families Need to Know

- ▶ **Family Support: Dr. Amanda Morales**
- ▶ **Parents' Struggles: Dr. Dina Bennett**

How First Generation Students Help the University

- ▶ **Funds of Knowledge: Dr. Steve Dandaneau**
- ▶ **Diversity of Perspectives: Dr. Debbie Mercer**
- ▶ **Giving Back to the Community & Culture: Dr. Amanda Morales**
- ▶ **Connectedness & Community Building: Dr. Steve Dandaneau**
- ▶ **Connectedness & Community Building: Dr. Pat Bosco**

Resources for First Generation High School and College Students

FAFSA

The Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is a must for all first generation students to complete. Based on a student's or their family's income, they are eligible for a range of funding in the form of grants, subsidized loans or unsubsidized loans.

Center for Student Opportunity

The Center for Student Opportunity (CSO) provides resources to help first generation college students reach and navigate through college. The CSO's **I'm First!** website in particular, is a great tool. It is an online community celebrating first generation college students and supporting those who will be. It includes resources with profiles of colleges and universities committed to serving FGC students, information about scholarships, a interactive planning and preparation curriculum, as well as information for parents and mentors in both Spanish and English.

KnowHow2GO

The KnowHow2Go web resource is designed for middle and high school students. It provides concrete advice and strategies to help students and their parents prepare for college.

Unigo

Unigo is an interactive website where students can search for colleges and get statistics on programs offered. Students learn what life is really like at colleges by reading student reviews,



watching videos, and browsing articles from college students across the country.

FirstGenerationStudent

The FirstGenerationStudent website provides guidance for how to pay for college, where to apply to college, and how to plan for college. It provides insights on improving your writing skills in preparation for college, understanding your financial aid options, and the advantages of being a FGC student.

AVID

The Advancement Via Individual Determination program is designed for 4th through 12th grade students. It is a comprehensive program implemented by the school system to prepare students for four-year college eligibility.

College Board Application Fee Waiver

College application fee waivers are a great way to save money when you're applying to college. If you're eligible for college application fee waivers, you'll receive them in the fall of your senior year. Not every college accepts the fee waiver.

NACAC Fee Waiver

The National Association for College Admission Counseling provides funds to students who have limited financial resources and are traditional high school students to apply to postsecondary colleges or universities. In order to be eligible students must be applying in the fall immediately following high school graduation.

FirstGenerationFilm

This powerful film tells the story of four high school students who seek to break the cycle of poverty by pursuing a college education. The site associated with the films provides

information about how to screen the film and how to get involved through volunteerism.

Beating the Odds

This webcast documents the Reach Higher "Beating the Odds" Summit. In July of 2015 the First Lady Michelle Obama welcomed 140 college-bound students who represented a wide range of communities to the White House. The summit celebrated these students' accomplishments, while also providing them with tips and resources to better prepare them for when they step on college campuses.

TRIO programs

TRIO programs are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO includes eight programs targeted to serve and assist low-income individuals, first generation college students, and individuals with disabilities to progress through the academic pipeline from middle school to postbaccalaureate programs.

First Scholars

First Scholars® is an initiative of The Suder Foundation, a private foundation located in Plano, Texas. The First Scholars program, administered on the campuses of selected, four-year, public universities, provides a data-driven approach to increasing the graduation rate of first generation college students. The foundation's funding priority is to develop and refine the **First Scholars program model** and expand their network of **affiliate universities**. The Suder Foundation launches new First Scholars sites by providing start-up and early-stage funding for program operations along with scholarship support for the initial cohort(s) of scholars.



Jackie Robinson Foundation

A national, not-for-profit, organization that supports the advancement of higher education among underserved populations by providing generous four-year college scholarships. Scholars in the Jackie Robinson Foundation (JRF) program receive peer and professional mentoring, internship placement, extensive leadership training, international travel and community service options, the conveyance of practical life skills, and a myriad of networking opportunities.

Institute for Responsible Citizenship

The Institute for Responsible Citizenship (IRC) selects scholars from all over the United States. They have a wide variety of interests and represent small liberal arts colleges, large universities, Ivy League institutions, and historically Black colleges and universities. The IRC supports sophomore to senior level students of color with a strong academic background who can commit to two summers for the Institute.

NCLR

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) is a national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. The nclr.org website provides a range of information for students, parents and organizations. Annually, NCLR conducts national scholarship competitions, provides Latino job reports, and hosts a wide range of advocacy and community partnership events across the country.

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¹This project was initiated by our college's dean who commissioned the college's videographer to produce the film to focus on the personal stories of first generation college students in hopes that these stories will inspire educators and future educators to better understand issues surrounding first generation student populations. We the researchers were the part of this film series, who helped selecting eight informants. Four of them are current students of the Kansas State University College of Education and the other four are the alumni of the college, from a variety of different ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. The goal of this video series was to gain a better understanding of what it means to be a first generation college student from the participants' perspectives. As indicated in the literature, research on the first generation college student is a critical topic that needs particular attention from researchers in higher education. However, the college's series on the first generation college student was not conceived as "research" even though it has generated rich, detailed qualitative data through life story interviews, observations, and the collection of artifacts such as photos. Upon the dean's request and with her financial support for transcribing the interviews, we contacted the participants again for their permission to use data for research. With their permission, we turned this film series into a research project by adding a review of the literature, data analysis, and implications for teacher education.

About the Authors

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